

Kansans and the Visual Arts

by William M. Tsutsui and Marjorie Swann

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Should Kansas “brag of the fact that it distributes its wealth equitably—almost evenly,” asked William Allen White in a 1922 essay for *The Nation*, “when it has produced no great poet, no great painter, no great musician, no great writer or philosopher?” The implied answer was “no.” But whether or not the Emporia editor and author was correct in his assessment or would come to a different conclusion looking back over the intervening eighty years, most would agree that the arts are “something eternally worthy,” and thus it seems obvious that they are also worthy of scholarly consideration, with respect to their meaning and significance to Kansas.

While Kansas has—since 1922, if not before—reared some artists of real note, the state has not birthed a comparable scholarly literature assessing the historical significance of the visual arts in the Sunflower State. The sixth piece in *Kansas History*'s review essay series is this contribution by William M. Tsutsui and Marjorie Swann, professors of history and English, re-

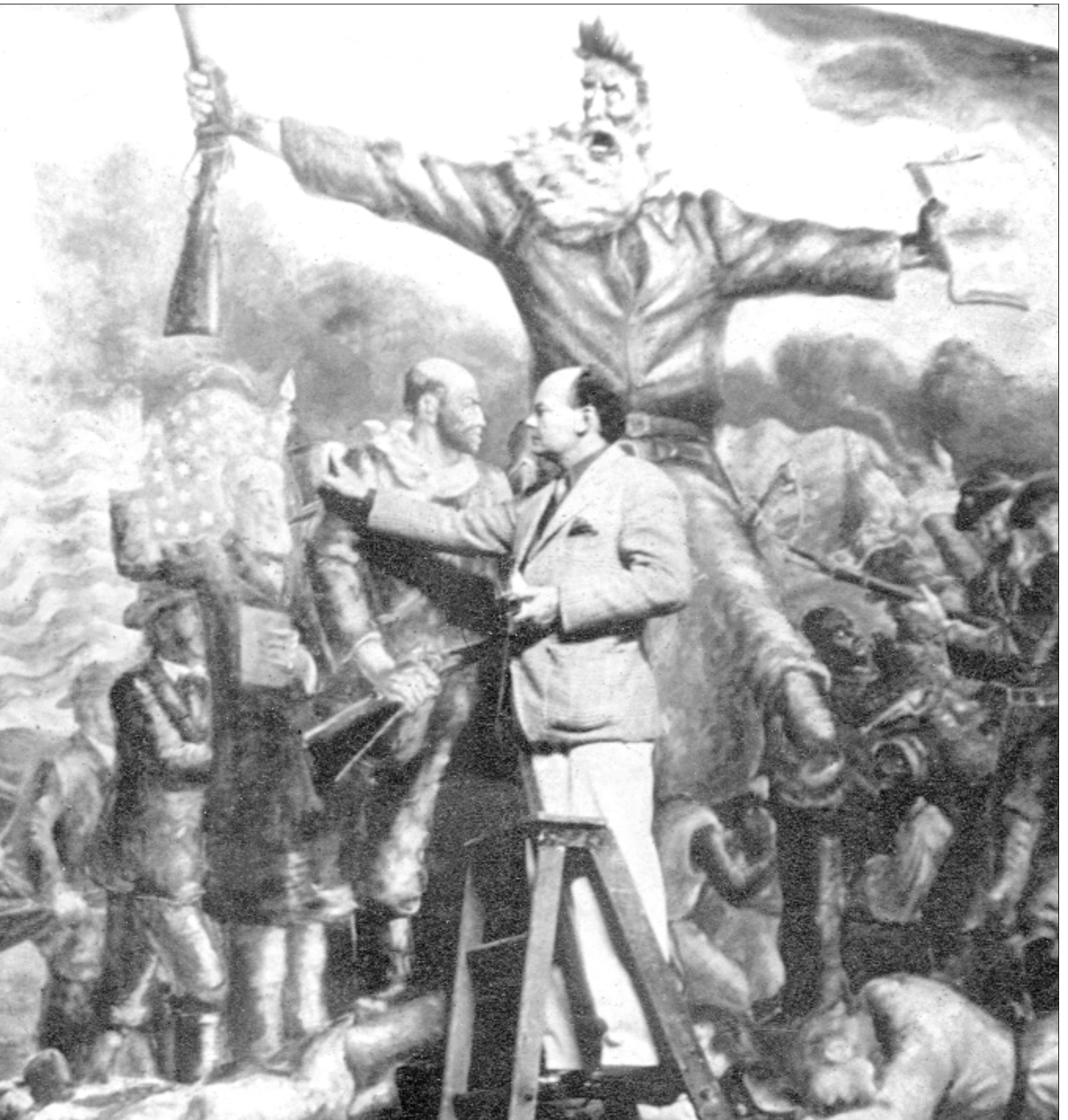
Kansans can be outspoken art critics. On the morning of December 27, 1900, temperance crusader Carry Nation “entered the saloon in the basement of the Carey Hotel [in Wichita] and without a word of warning pulled from a bundle of papers which she carried in her hands two large stones. Before the clerks and bartenders could realize what was going on Mrs. Nation sent one of the stones whizzing through a large oil nude painting of Cleopatra at the Roman bath.” The salacious painting, by local artist John Noble, depicted a disrobed Cleopatra, several similarly naked handmaidens, and “two huge eunuchs who fanned her . . . clad only in loincloths.” As Mrs. Nation later explained her violent response to the barroom art of Wichita, “The consequence of putting such pictures in these places is, that evil, vicious thoughts are suggested, the animal in man is aroused; and as a result, men are degraded in morals.”¹

John Steuart Curry never had to endure physical assaults against the murals he painted in the Kansas statehouse between

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1. *Topeka Daily Capital*, December 28, 1900; Robert Lewis Taylor, *Vessel of Wrath: The Life and Times of Carry Nation* (New York: New American Library, 1966), 133; Julia Stanley Henderson, *Kingdom of the Home Or, "Carry in Kansas"* (Modesto, Calif.: Valley Citizen Press, 1938), 31.





Kansas artist John Stewart Curry stands before The Tragic Prelude, perhaps his most famous Kansas statehouse mural.

spectively, at the University of Kansas. "Kansans and the Visual Arts" explores the state's rich visual arts heritage, analyzes the existing scholarly literature on that subject, and examines the opportunities for future scholars of Kansas and the arts.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, Tsutsui and Swann found a dearth of good, published work on their subject but a fascinating and important story to be told. "A new generation of scholarship published since the 1970s," they observe, "has broadened our conception of who is regarded as an artist, what constitutes art, and how Kansas art should be contextualized historically . . . integrating the story of art into the greater historical narrative of Kansas is a fundamental challenge for future researchers. Breaking down the artificial boundaries which have separated art history from the major social, political, economic, environmental and intellectual debates of the state's past is essential. . . . In the simplest terms," the authors argue, "scholars should acknowledge the extent to which art pervades history and history pervades art."

Contemporary artists have come to appreciate and celebrate "place" and thus Kansas. Historians must continue to do the same and build upon a relatively new but solid foundation. As the authors here clearly demonstrate, these new perspectives have wonderfully complicated the historical narrative and, "in the process, greatly enriched our understanding of the state's artistic development," while opening "new directions for scholarly inquiry" and bringing "into question not just the boundaries of what we consider 'art,' but also what we take to be 'Kansas.'"

Virgil W. Dean
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1937 and 1942. However, in the process of creating what probably are the best-known works ever produced by a Kansas artist, he did face a constant stream of nitpicking criticism and public derision. Some detail-oriented farmers, for example, noted that actual pigs—unlike the aesthetically posed ones in Curry's murals—curled their tails as they ate. After a morning in a Maple Hill farmyard, Curry reported that "pigs aren't particular whether their tails are marcelled or not."² Nonetheless, to quiet the rumblings of local discontent, Curry eventually repainted several of his pigs with the requisite curly tails.

Not just the famous and elite among artists were subjected to the pictorial literalism and freely offered critiques of the Kansas public. Sue Jean Covacevich, who executed a mural in the lobby of the First National Bank of Winfield in 1952, testified to the tribulations of a Kansas artist, especially one foolhardy enough to try depicting a Hereford bull:

That was the hardest thing I ever painted because the cattle men came in and would say, "The brisket is too wide. You have to get it a little narrower. You have it too long." Or, "You have the testicles too far front!" So I'd move them back and then have two farmers come in and say, "Look, I know my bull and you have them too far back." Finally I asked the bank president, "Couldn't I put a lot of grass in front of that bull? I'm tired of moving those testicles!"³

As these three examples suggest, Kansans have long been deeply engaged with art, and Kansas artists have demonstrated great perseverance, even in occasionally trying circumstances. Yet the importance of visual art in the state has often gone far deeper than concerns—however vehemently stated—over saloon nudes, flaccid pig tails, and the anatomy of Hereford bulls. Art in Kansas has been used as a yardstick for gauging progress, "civilization," and state pride, a cultural trophy cherished as a sign of the state's maturity and success but one seldom embraced with unfettered spiritual relish. Art has also served as an imperfect looking glass in which Kansans have hoped to see cherished, imagined visions of themselves—as courageous pioneers, conquerors of nature, torchbearers of progress—as well as discover the essence of an elusive "Kansas spirit." Yet like Carry Nation gazing uncomfortably upon the bathing Cleopatra, Kansans often have found that art is not necessarily pretty or palatable; indeed, Kansas art of the past 150 years frequently has reflected aspects of the state's landscape, culture, and history that many find distasteful, distorted, or irrelevant. Art is not a neutral subject in Kansas and, for that very reason, can be a revealing topic for historical inquiry.

Although the visual arts in Kansas have a long, rich history, the literature on the subject is surprisingly diffuse and fragmentary.⁴ In 1946 one prominent commentator noted that "the history of art in Kansas deserves a modern and extensive study." Nevertheless, more than fifty years later no such scholarly overview has been published and, unlike most states with significant artistic traditions,

2. Sue Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism: John Stewart Curry and the Kansas Mural Controversy* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1986), 126.

3. Quotation in Jani Sherrard, "Conversations," in *The Kansas Art Reader*, ed. Jonathan Wesley Bell (Lawrence: Independent Study, University of Kansas, 1976), 425.

4. Although this essay considers the visual arts broadly defined, the emphasis is on painting and printmaking.

Kansas even lacks a historical dictionary of local artists.⁵ In light of these deficiencies, this essay will begin with a basic historical survey of the visual arts in Kansas before proceeding to a more detailed historiographical analysis of the scholarly work conducted over the past three decades. The essay concludes with a brief discussion of the challenges and opportunities for future scholars who wish to construct a more rigorous, coherent, and inclusive history of Kansas art.

THE VISUAL ARTS IN KANSAS: AN OVERVIEW

Virtually all historians have begun their narratives of Kansas art with the nineteenth-century Euro-American painters who accompanied the many expeditions that “explored, perused, and surveyed” the Great Plains.⁶ Robert Taft, a meticulous student of early Kansas art, declared “the first sketch . . . made in Kansas” to be *War Dance in the Interior of a Konza Lodge*, drawn on August 24, 1819, by Samuel Seymour, the first of these “explorer-artists” and a member of Major Stephen Long’s surveying party. Taft hardly was alone in ignoring the artistic work of the native inhabitants of the Plains region. Even broadly inclusive treatments, such as that in the 1939 Work Projects Administration (WPA) guide to the state, dispatched the Native American artistic heritage in a few lines: “The aboriginal Indians of Kansas produced baskets, bead work, and pottery. . . . Many outstanding examples of Indian artifacts and of arts and crafts have been collected in Kansas museums.” Writing in 1956 John Helm, the founder of the art program at Kansas State University, acknowledged an artistic tradition predating white settlement but which, he concluded, left little legacy: “The plains Indians, while not developing an art as sophisticated as the Pueblo Indians, did have an art . . . in which real design quality can be found. . . . Their ceremonies and dances had a feeling for the aesthetic [although] it is difficult to find any influence of these ceremonies on the artists of this region today.” As a 1961 catalog of historical Kansas art observed, Native Americans were not contributors to the early artistic development of Kansas but merely subjects of others’ depictions: “The Indians, of course, provided an exotic strangeness, and the works of art concerning them are boundless.”⁷

Although Albert Bierstadt, a member of F. W. Lander’s 1859 expedition across Kansas, enthused that “the wildness and abandon of nature here is very attractive to an artistic eye,” most of his fellow painters were less complimentary, suffering through the tedium of the Plains for the ultimate aesthetic reward of Rocky Mountain vistas. As later observers agreed, the documentary work of the transient explorer-artists tended toward the superficial. According to John Helm, “The first white artists who visited this region were naturally European or eastern trained

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5. Robert Taft, “The Pictorial Record of the Old West, III. Henry Worrall,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 14 (August 1946): 241. On the history of art in other states, see, for example, Arthur Huseboe, *An Illustrated History of the Arts in South Dakota* (Sioux Falls: Augustana College, 1989); Paula and Michael Grauer, eds., *Dictionary of Texas Artists, 1800–1945* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999).

6. Joni Kinsey, *Plain Pictures: Images of the American Prairie* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 6.

7. Robert Taft, *Artists and Illustrators of the Old West, 1958–1900* (New York: Scribner’s, 1953), 342 n. 2; Federal Writers’ Project, Work Projects Administration, *Kansas: A Guide to the Sunflower State* (New York: Viking, 1939), 139; *Kansas Centennial Historical Art Exhibition* (Topeka: Mulvane Art Center, 1961).



Early attempts to develop and promote an interest in art in Kansas included formation of the Kansas State Art Association in 1883, which operated a museum and private art school (above).

and brought that viewpoint with them. Their work, often in the nature of reporting, is usually remarkably well designed [but] is, naturally, a transplanted art and shows little effect of the country upon the artist." "Early art in Kansas and this plains region," Helm maintained, "has had little effect on subsequent developments here."⁸

The growth of an indigenous art culture in Kansas is generally depicted as a slow and arduous process. "In the three or four decades following the establishment of Kansas territory in 1854," Robert Taft wrote in 1946,

few Kansas artists attempted to depict life in Kansas. . . . To be sure, there was cultural growth, especially in the fields of education, of journalism, and of music, but on the whole the energy of these earlier Kansans was directed chiefly to the establishment of farms, homes and villages, to the building of railroads, to combating inclement weather and voracious insects.

Even into the 1880s some contended that the primal struggle for survival on the prairies precluded aesthetic pursuits. A character in Edgar Howe's 1883 novel *The Story of a Country Town* unapologetically declares that "Those of us who live in the country . . . may have our ambitions like other men, but they are dwarfed and bent by holding the plow. . . . We have no time for the fine arts, you may be certain."⁹ Even beyond the rigors of pioneer life, the harshness and unfamiliarity of the Plains landscape made Kansas an unpromising venue for artistic development. Reflecting the aesthetic gulf between the treeless prairie and the pictorial conventions of Victorian landscape painting, contemporary author and traveler Robert Louis Stevenson bemoaned the region's oppressive horizontality, "a sickness of vision peculiar to these empty plains."¹⁰ "The challenge for prairie painters," a later observer reflected,

has been to see and represent presence rather than absence. This has required skill and vision to move from the dominance of the vertical, so central to previous aesthetic notions, toward an accommodation of the horizontal. . . . Above all, it has challenged a capacity to represent distance, . . . to accommo-

8. James Nottage, *Prairie Visions: Art of the American West* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1984), 6, 10; John F. Helm Jr., "Artist Explorers," *Kansas Magazine* (1956): 103.

9. Taft, "The Pictorial Record of the Old West, III. Henry Worrall," 241; Howe quotation in Charles Eldredge, "William Dickerson's Kansas," in *The Regionalist Vision of William Dickerson*, ed. Bill North (Manhattan, Kans.: Beach Museum of Art, 1997), 1-2.

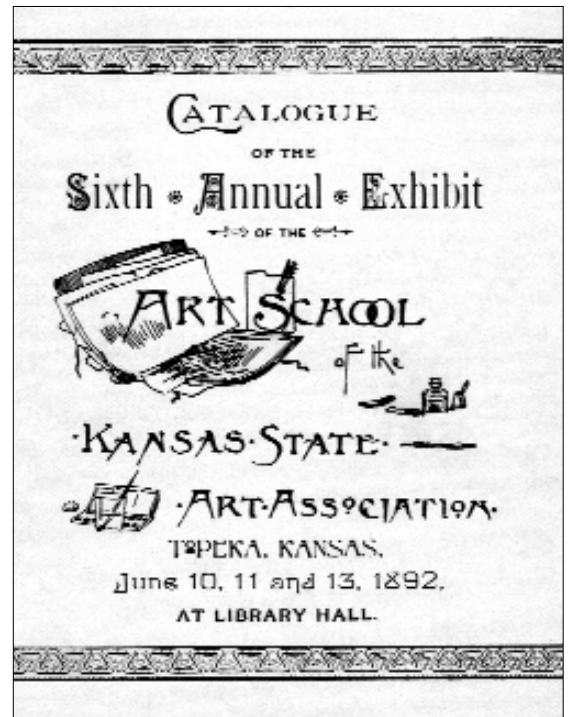
10. Stevenson quotation in Kinsey, *Plain Pictures*, 98.

date a world in which foreground, middle distance, and background refuse to keep their assigned places, intertwining in an elaborate choreography that has . . . confused and dislocated those who have entered this country's grass-filled interior.¹¹

Although "Kansas, in its early history, could enumerate but few artists among its citizens," a growing interest in art was discernable over the course of the nineteenth century.¹² Settlers' wives, eager to reproduce the cultured ambiance of eastern parlors, decorated the sod walls of their dugouts with engravings. Art instruction began at Baker University in 1858 and at Washburn College seven years later. The Kansas State Art Association, incorporated in Topeka in 1883, opened a modest museum and briefly operated a private art school. The Leavenworth Art League, a women's club, sponsored a similar academy in the 1890s "considered, especially by the women of the state, as a leading and efficient institution in the domain of art."¹³

Clearly, despite the exigencies of pioneer life, the visual arts were valued in nineteenth-century Kansas. Art demanded attention not least because it conveyed an aura of culture, gentility, and permanence on the young state and its aspiring residents. Writing in the wake of the Spanish-American War, William Allen White, a staunch advocate for the fine arts in Kansas, proclaimed that "The perpetration of images of the beautiful has always been a part of civilization and it always will be. [While] Kansas is producing fighters who astonish the world by their achievements, the state should remember that art, too, has a place in the best civilized state; and that the people who neglect art for arms, will revert to barbarism."¹⁴ The encouragement of a home-grown art tradition, White and others maintained, would elevate Kansas in the estimation of the many Americans who persistently imagined the state as a cultural wasteland of "gaudily painted red-skins and stampeding herds of long horned cattle."¹⁵ Art was regarded as a true gauge of civilization and Kansans, were they not to be left forever behind in the march of progress, were expected—and often prodded by critics like White—to embrace the ennobling properties of art.

The first resident Kansas artist who could claim a "reputation almost national" was Henry Worrall. A native of England, Worrall arrived in Topeka in 1868 and, although apparently untrained in art, quickly gained a reputation as a painter and illustrator. Best remembered today for his tongue-in-cheek sketch *Drouthy Kansas*, which featured farmhouse-sized watermelons and gargantuan ears of corn, Worrall also contributed drawings to *Harper's Weekly*.¹⁶ The first na-



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11. Wayne Fields, "Foreword," in *ibid.*, xvi.

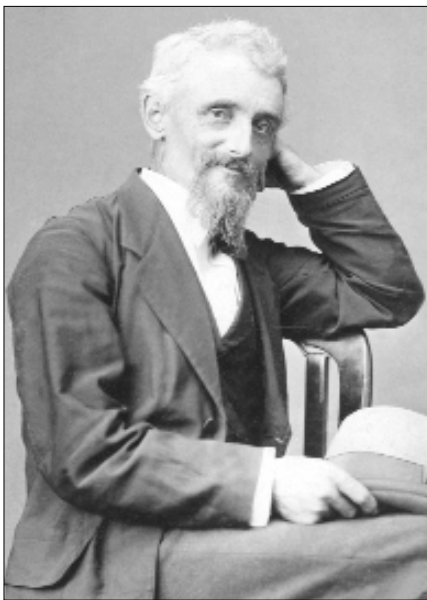
12. Taft, "The Pictorial Record of the Old West, III. Henry Worrall," 241.

13. Mrs. C. F. W. Dassler, "Art," in *Kansas Souvenir: St. Louis Exposition, 1904* (Topeka: G. A. Clark, 1904), 24; see also Angel Kwolek-Folland, "The Elegant Dugout: Domesticity and Moveable Culture in the United States, 1870–1900," *American Studies* 25 (Fall 1984): 21–38; Edna Reinbach, "Kansas Art and Artists," *Kansas Historical Collections, 1926–1928* 17 (1928): 571.

14. William Allen White, "Art in Kansas," *Emporia Gazette*, May 9, 1899.

15. C. A. Seward, "The Millet of the Prairies," *Kansas Magazine* 2 (August 1909): 1.

16. Taft, *Artists and Illustrators of the Old West*, 325 n. 5; Frederic Remington lived on a Butler County ranch from 1883 to 1884, although this was well before he attained fame as an illustrator and sculptor of scenes of the American West. See Alta Crawford and Gordon Schultz, "Frederic Remington: Artist of the People," *Kansas Quarterly* 9 (Fall 1977): 89–118.



Henry Worrall was the first Kansas artist who could claim a “reputation almost national.” Born in England, he came to Topeka in 1868 untrained in art, but he quickly gained a reputation as a painter and illustrator.



This Worrall cartoon, entitled *Grangers Versus Hoppers*, depicts the plight of the Kansas farmer.

tive Kansas artist of note was George Stone, born near Topeka in 1858. Stone studied in the salons of Paris before returning to his hometown, where he was esteemed as a portraitist and genre painter. Dubbed the “Millet of the Prairies,” Stone operated a successful art school in Topeka with Albert T. Reid, another native Kansan and a celebrated cartoonist.¹⁷

Unlike George Stone, many prominent members of the first generation of Kansas-born artists pursued their careers outside their native state. Although the colorful John Noble of Wichita declared that “Kansas does not breed expatriots,” he—like noted painter Henry Salem Hubbell and Kansas-raised artists such as Fern Coppedge—studied, worked, and established their artistic reputations on the East Coast. Noble, it was said, “used to sit around the little, tin-topped tables in the sidewalk cafes of Paris . . . and tell them all about Kansas.”¹⁸ Not too many Parisian bohemians may have been won over by Noble’s tales of droughts and sod houses, yet several talented artists did follow Worrall’s lead and settle in Kansas in the late nineteenth century. Foremost among them was Birger Sandzén, son of a Swedish pastor, classically trained as a painter in Stockholm and Paris. Inspired by Carl Swensson’s *I Sverige* and its compelling description of the Swedish community in Lindsborg, Sandzén joined the faculty of Bethany College in 1894. During the sixty years that he lived in Lindsborg, Sandzén became a tireless advocate for the fine arts in Kansas, an acclaimed painter and printmaker, and “so thorough a Kansan that he is our most characteristic and dynamic artistic force.”¹⁹

Although later generations of art historians have focused on formally trained, professional male artists like Sandzén, the visual arts generally were regarded as a female pursuit in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Kansas. Art appreciation was largely a female preserve, and women’s clubs were particularly active in promoting the classical traditions of western art. At the celebrations of the quarter-centennial of Kansas statehood, for example, Noble Prentis boasted that the state’s women were conversant with “all the artists from Henry Worrall to

Praxiteles.” As Robert Taft perceptively noted, Prentis’s comment “unwittingly reveals the public attitude toward art in 1886 [as] a matter discussed only by women.”²⁰ But Kansas women did not just talk about art; they actively produced it as well. At

17. Seward, “The Millet of the Prairies,” 1; John Ripley and Robert Richmond, eds., *Albert Reid’s Sketchbook* (Topeka: Shawnee County Historical Society, 1971).

18. Florence Snow, “Kansas Art and Artists, VI. John Noble,” *Kansas Teacher* 26 (February 1928): 20; “John Noble, Kansas Artist,” *Emporia Gazette*, January 9, 1934.

19. Snow, “Kansas Art and Artists, III. Birger Sandzén,” *Kansas Teacher* 26 (November 1927): 11. The literature on Sandzén is extensive. The standard biography is Emory Lindquist, *Birger Sandzén: An Illustrated Biography* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993).

20. Taft, “The Pictorial Record of the Old West, III. Henry Worrall,” 243. On women’s clubs and art in Kansas, see William M. Tsutsui and Marjorie Swann, “‘Open Your Eyes to the Beauty Around You’: The Art Collection of the Kansas Federation of Women’s Clubs,” in *Tallgrass Essays: Papers from the Symposium in Honor of Dr. Ramon Powers*, ed. Michael H. Hoefflich, Gayle R. Davis, and Jim Hoy (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, Inc., 2003), 59–80.

the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, the art exhibit at the Kansas pavilion was dominated by the exuberant paintings of amateur female artists. Foremost among them was *The Spirit of Kansas*, a large allegorical oil by septuagenarian Mary Weston of Lawrence, which depicts a young woman, bedecked with sunflowers and the American flag, riding a white charger and holding aloft a dove of peace. Even the harshest critics of later days saw in the World's Fair display an impressive energy and yearning for art: "If many things bordered on the naive, the absurd, the gauche, the unfinished, . . . nevertheless it breathed an aspiration for democratic self-expression."²¹

For all the artistic achievements in the decades after the settling of Kansas, much public handwringing over the supposedly stunted cultural climate of the state continued even well into the 1920s. As William Allen White floridly bemoaned in 1922,

What we lack most keenly is a sense of beauty and the love of it. Nothing is more gorgeous in color and form than a Kansas sunset; yet it is hidden from us. . . . The human spirit—whatever it is in God's creation—here under these winds and droughts and wintry blasts, here under these drear and gloomy circumstances of life, has battled with ruthless fate . . . yet the story is untold, and life no richer for the nobility that has passed untitled in marble or in bronze or in prose.²²

Such laments were motivated, at least in part, by mounting criticism of Kansas and its culture (or lack thereof) from the urban centers of the East. As historian Robert Smith Bader has documented, external perceptions of Kansas changed radically during the 1920s, the state falling from "a secure, even triumphant position as an exemplar for the nation" to being the "national symbol of a waning rural culture." The modern urbanites' disdain for the "cultural sterility of the hinterland" was captured in a 1923 editorial in the *Chicago Tribune*, which assured its readers that Kansas's "greatest architectural monument" was a silo, "the greatest work of art a crazy quilt and the greatest thrill in life a snooze in stocking feet by the base burner."²³

For all the jibes of the big-city media, however, the 1920s marked the beginning of a period of remarkable innovation, maturation, and achievement for the visual arts in Kansas. Although "Kansas" still remained synonymous with "provincial" to many Americans, the years from the mid-1920s to the start of World War II witnessed a surge of creativity in painting and printmaking, increasing public engagement with the fine arts, and a growing sense of "Kansas art" as something real, distinctive, and significant.²⁴

The roots of this artistic flowering were varied but intertwined. By the 1920s the efforts of more than half a century of art promotion in the state—training in

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21. Carleton Beals, "Kansas at the World's Fair," *Kansas Magazine* (1942): 23–24.

22. William Allen White, "Kansas: A Puritan Survival," in *What Kansas Means to Me*, ed. Thomas Fox Averill (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 62.

23. Robert Smith Bader, *Hayseeds, Moralizers, and Methodists: The Twentieth-Century Image of Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 42, 48, 64, 49.

24. See Bill North, *The Prints of John F. Helm, Jr., A Catalogue Raisonné* (Manhattan, Kans.: Beach Museum of Art, 2001), 9.



*At the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, the art exhibit in the Kansas pavilion was dominated by paintings of amateur female artists. Foremost among them was *The Spirit of Kansas*, a large allegorical oil by Mary Weston of Lawrence.*

schools, the opening of museums in Topeka (1924) and at the University of Kansas (1926)—were bearing fruit in terms of a broader public appreciation of art and an expansion in homegrown creative talent. At the same time, national trends began to favor an artistic turn toward Kansas and the Middle West in general. In the wake of World War I, realistic depictions of the so-called “American Scene” became the national artistic fashion. As Charles Eldredge explained it, “the pre-war achievements of vanguard non-objective artists were challenged by new concerns for representation and for subject matter, often local or regional. After the horrors of military conflict, a generation of creative artists seemingly looked homeward, there to cultivate their own gardens after the disillusionments of world war.”²⁵ That these homeward-bound artists would come to focus particularly on the agrarian Midwest was not coincidental: as Wall Street crashed and the Roaring Twenties gave way to the Dirty Thirties, many Americans yearned for a therapeutic return to a simpler, gentler place and time. “American culture suddenly rediscovered the territory west of the Hudson River,” one historian has observed. “At a time of national crisis, all things distinctively American became precious affirmations of an imperiled identity.”²⁶

Regionalism, as this sentimental embrace of the rural heartland by American artists became known, was championed most trenchantly by Thomas Craven, a Salina native and influential art critic. Condemned by some for touting a nationalistic, conservative agenda for American art, Craven rejected metropolitan elites and the imported contagion of abstraction:

If we are ever to have an indigenous expression, it will be an art proceeding from strong native impulses, simple ideas, and popular tastes. . . . If the mechanized United States has produced no plastic art of any richness or vitality, it is because she has borrowed her art from foreign sources, and refused to utilize the most exciting materials that have ever challenged the creative mind, . . . the immensity of New York; . . . the tractors in the Kansas wheat fields.²⁷

Among the practitioners of Craven’s Regionalist creed, a triumvirate of native midwesterners—Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, Grant Wood of Iowa, and Kansan John Steuart Curry—attracted the most critical attention and public acclaim. Curry was born in 1897 on his family’s farm in Jefferson County. Unsited to the life of a farmer (he admitted as a teenager that “I would rather draw a pic-

25. Eldredge, “William Dickerson’s Kansas,” 2.

26. Karal Ann Marling, “The Prairie Print Makers: Five-Dollar Culture in the Great Depression,” in *The Prairie Printmakers* (Kansas City: ExhibitsUSA, 2001), 8.

27. Thomas Craven, *Men of Art* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1931), 506, 508.

ture of myself shoveling manure than do it"²⁸), Curry studied art in Chicago and New Jersey before settling in Connecticut and becoming an illustrator and society artist. Curry burst onto the national art scene when his painting *Baptism in Kansas*, the dramatic depiction of a Campbellite immersion ritual in a farmyard cattle trough, was purchased for the new Whitney Museum of American Art in 1931. Curry's paintings of rural Kansas were hailed by New York critics as authentic, literal expressions of a simple and honest midwestern sensibility: the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* wrote of his "undiluted," "native" quality while Edward Alden Jewell proclaimed in the *New York Times* that "Kansas has found her Homer."²⁹

For all Curry's superlative reviews on the East Coast, Kansans were reluctant to embrace an artist, even a native son, who favored images that cast Kansas in an unfavorable light. His paintings of fundamentalist rites, tornadoes, and backwoods manhunts toasted by the New York art elite made many Kansans bristle. In 1931 an exhibition of Curry's works, promoted locally by William Allen White, toured several sites in Kansas. Although Curry may have expected a triumphant homecoming—not to mention the sale of a few canvasses—the new *wunderkind* of Regionalism received a cool, even somewhat hostile, reception from his fellow Kansans. "I feel Mr. Curry has a great force in delineating the subjects he has chosen," wrote Elsie J. Allen of Wichita, former first lady of the state, "but to say he portrays the 'spirit' of Kansas is entirely wrong. . . . [W]hy paint outstanding friekish [*sic*] subjects and call them the 'spirit' of Kansas?" While William Allen White apparently dismissed such reactions as just more evidence of Kansans' deplorable insensitivity to artistic beauty, Curry rationalized the slight from his home state—and his failure to sell a single work—in a different way. "They have Kansas," Curry opined. "They hardly need paintings."³⁰

Yet Kansans were not entirely dismissive of the value of art, nor were they uniquely sensitive to negative portrayals of themselves and their home state. The idealized visions Curry created for New York patrons were not the same idealized visions that most Kansans held of themselves. The celebrated Regionalists, art historians have observed, did not document so much as mythologize, reaffirming the stereotypes and satisfying the nostalgia-laden dreams of East Coast trendsetters: "The Kansas invented by Curry—along with the Missouri invented by Benton and the Iowa invented by Wood—contained the power of myth."³¹ At the same time, Kansans too viewed their midwestern home through rose-colored glasses and the image they cherished most dearly of themselves—progressive, modern, and certainly not provincial—did not jibe with Curry's "friekish" paintings. That New Yorkers could consider Curry an honest-to-God prairie Homer, and many Kansans tended to see him as just another sneering easterner, confirms the notion that a dynamic tension between the ideal and the real, pervasive stereotypes and elusive authenticity, lay at the core of depression-era Regionalism.³²

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28. Patricia Junker, "The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry," in *John Steuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West*, ed. Junker (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1998), 212.

29. *Ibid.*, 219–20.

30. Elsie J. Allen quotation in *ibid.*, 221. See William Allen White, "Just Wondering," *Kansas Magazine* (1934): 86–88; Curry quotation in Calder M. Pickett, "John Steuart Curry and the Topeka Murals Controversy," *Kansas Quarterly* 2 (Fall 1970): 32.

31. Elizabeth Broun, "Introduction: Kansas Before Curry," in *Kansas Printmakers*, ed. Gregory Gilbert and David Henry (Lawrence, Kans.: Spencer Museum of Art, 1981), 11.

32. See Kinsey, *Plain Pictures*, ch. 4.

Curry's national fame may have been lost on many skeptical Kansans, but his prominence did draw attention to the visual arts in the state. The vogue for Regionalism—along with the appearance of a sizeable group of productive, talented artists resident in Kansas in the 1920s and 1930s—stimulated a rising sense of optimism regarding the state's artistic development. As early as 1928 Fern Coppedge could declare that "Kansas is the coming state for painters," and by the 1930s a chorus of notables proclaimed Kansas's arrival as a lively art center. "Now at last the middle west," Wichita art maven Faye Davison wrote in 1933, "is producing artists who cannot be ignored. . . . In fact it may be from this very middle west the vital art of the future will come. Far removed from the eastern and western extremes, this section of the country has been forced to develop an individual art drawn from vast plains and pioneer peoples." As John Helm provocatively concluded in 1936, "If there is to be an American renaissance within this decade it will be more likely to be germinated and develop in Kansas soil than in that of any other state in the union."³³

That Kansas art should flourish, especially at a time of mounting economic uncertainty, was "made possible by a confluence of the historical moment and the existence of a handful of exceptional and committed individuals."³⁴ One prominent member of this group who had "been working quietly, but efficiently, 'taking care of the talent' [and] as a result developing a typical and worthy Kansas art," was

Carl Smalley.³⁵ Smalley was an unlikely impresario: the son of a McPherson seed dealer, he developed a passion for prints after visiting the art displays at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exhibition. Taking over a corner of his father's store, Smalley sold prints, books, and other "things of the spirit."³⁶ His promotion of art appreciation was so successful that by 1918 the seed business had been transformed into Smalley's Art Shop, and McPherson was gaining an international reputation for its sophisticated taste and considerable purchases of original art. Smalley worked closely with Sandzén (who made his first prints at Smalley's urging) and with the McPherson public schools, which held popular annual art exhibitions from 1910 and accumulated an important collection of works by American and European artists. Considering the challenge of selling art even in major cities, Smalley's achievement in rural Kansas was such that the *International Studio* magazine christened him "the world's greatest art dealer."³⁷

33. Coppedge quotation in Snow, "Kansas Art and Artists, VIII. Fern Coppedge," *Kansas Teacher* 26 (April 1928), 17; Faye Davison, "What I Know About Kansas Artists," *Kansas Magazine* (1933): 43; see also Birger Sandzén, "C. A. Seward—Promoter of Kansas Art," *ibid.* (1937): 1–2; John F. Helm Jr., "An Appraisal of Some Mid-Western Painters," *ibid.* (1936): 90.

34. North, *The Prints of John F. Helm, Jr.*, 9.

35. Sandzén, "C. A. Seward—Promoter of Kansas Art," 1.

36. North, *The Prints of John F. Helm, Jr.*, 13.

37. On Smalley, see Margaret Sandzén, "John the Baptist of Art," *Kansas Magazine* (1939): 7–10; Bill North, "Prairie Impressions: The Prairie Print Makers and Print Culture in Kansas," in *The Prairie Print Makers*, 20–21. On school art collecting, see Cynthia Mines, *For the Sake of Art* (privately printed, 1979).

Kansas native John Stuart Curry burst onto the national scene with his painting Baptism in Kansas and was hailed by New York critics.

Artists themselves also became active art promoters in depression-era Kansas. Sandzén was endlessly enthusiastic: he organized the annual art display at Bethany College's Messiah festival, talked to countless civic groups, and founded the Smoky Hill Art Club, which boasted a membership of four hundred in the 1930s. C. A. Seward, a Kansas native and student of Stone and Sandzén, was another important leader, a "catalytic agent [in] the development of a true Kansas art."³⁸ A skilled lithographer and one of the first commercial artists in Wichita, Seward encouraged young local talent and was instrumental in establishing the Kansas Federation of Art and the Wichita Art Museum. From his position at Kansas State University, John Helm was a similar presence in art circles, founding the Friends of Art in 1934 to support programs on campus and serving as art editor of the revived and influential *Kansas Magazine* from 1933.³⁹

Perhaps the most important formal organization created by Kansas artists between the world wars was the Prairie Print Makers, a group formed in December 1930 "to further the interests of both artists and laymen in printmaking and collecting."⁴⁰ Its charter members constituted a virtual Who's Who of Kansas art at the time: in addition to Seward (the motive force behind the group's establishment), Sandzén, and Smalley, its founders included Charles Capps, Leo Courtney, and Lloyd Foltz (all accomplished artists from Wichita), Herschel Logan (the so-called "Prairie Woodcutter" from Salina), and Arthur and Norma Bassett Hall (husband and wife printmakers from Howard). The Prairie Print Makers invited collectors and prominent artists from around the country to join the group and, in exchange for modest dues, to receive an annual gift print made by one of the members.⁴¹ The organization also staged traveling exhibitions of works by member artists that circulated to museums, libraries, and schools throughout Kansas and across the nation.

The Prairie Print Makers served many purposes, from providing fellowship for its geographically isolated members to the more hard-nosed business of cultivating a market for art in a region not known for its generous patronage. Yet the group also embraced an idealistic notion of democratizing art by making original works available to a larger public and promoting the diffusion of quality prints beyond museums and galleries. "If the only pictures available for homes were oils and water colors," Sandzén explained, "the sheer cost of these would necessarily sharply limit the possession of good pictures to the well-to-do. However, practically everybody can afford a good print." Thus prints were "a valuable vehicle to bring Kansas art to the home."⁴² In this popularizing zeal the members of the Prairie Print Makers reflected not just the populist heritage of Kansas but also the artistic trends of the day. Across the nation in the 1920s and 1930s, a surge of enthusiasm for printmaking and a proliferation of print clubs (most very much

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38. Sandzén, "C. A. Seward—Promoter of Kansas Art," 2. On Seward, see also Barbara Thompson O'Neill and George C. Foreman, in cooperation with Howard W. Ellington, *The Prairie Print Makers* (Wichita, Kans.: Gallery Ellington, 1984), 12-19.

39. See North, *The Prints of John F. Helm, Jr.*

40. Quotation in O'Neill and Foreman, *The Prairie Print Makers*, 3.

41. The other founding members were Clarence Hotvedt and Edmund Kopietz. Among the noted Kansas artists who eventually joined the Prairie Print Makers were John Steuart Curry, John Helm Jr., Kenneth Adams, E. Hubert Deines, William Dickerson, Glenn Golton, Ted Hawkins, Mary Huntoon, and Charles Rogers.

42. Sandzén, "C. A. Seward—Promoter of Kansas Art," 4.



Formed in 1930, the Prairie Print Makers became one of the most important formal organizations of Kansas artists. Its charter members, constituting a virtual Who's Who of Kansas Art, are depicted here at the studio of Birger Sandzén in Lindsborg. Left to right are Edmund M. Kopietz, Carl J. Small-ey, Herschel C. Logan, Lloyd C. Foltz, C. A. Hotvedt, Arthur W. Hall, Norma Bassett Hall, C. A. Seward, Birger Sandzén, Charles Capps, and Leo Courtney.

like the Prairie Print Makers) reflected the growing belief among artists that their work should be accessible—financially as well as aesthetically—to a larger public.⁴³

Although the mainstream of Kansas artists during the 1930s—as represented by the Prairie Print Makers—could not “rightly be said to constitute a school,” commentators stressed their shared “realistic attitude,” a common belief “that man’s art should in a large measure be concerned with the conditions of his life.”⁴⁴ In this, of course, the sentiments of resident Kansas artists and the Regionalist followers of Thomas Craven would appear to have overlapped. Yet as John Helm (among others) consistently maintained, “that vigorous individualism, that reforming spirit, at work in Kansas art” predated Curry’s rise to prominence and took a form subtly distinct from that preached and practiced by the celebrated Regionalist triumvirate. Significantly, interwar Kansas artists seemed less inclined to indulge in the nostalgic yearning

for a rural utopia, the mythologizing, and the occasional condescension that characterized the work of Benton, Wood, and Curry. “The regionalists portrayed Kansas as decidedly provincial and drew from this provincialism a mood of nostalgia,” art historian Elizabeth Broun has written. “Sandzén, Seward and their colleagues, however, portrayed their contemporary experience [as] simple, unadorned reality.”⁴⁵

The unromanticized vision of the landscape favored by Kansas artists of the 1930s, economic both stylistically and in price, clearly resonated with many Kansans. Art, surprisingly enough, actually seemed to matter, even in a state beset by depression and the Dust Bowl. This became particularly evident in several extended, heated debates over works of public art, most famously, of course, over the murals executed by John Steuart Curry at the state capitol. The saga of Curry’s paintings in Topeka is now well known. After a vigorous campaign by newspaper editors, Curry was commissioned in 1937 to paint a series of large murals in the rotunda and adjacent corridors of the Kansas statehouse. Curry’s images were controversial from the start: *Kansas Pastoral*, a bucolic idyll of prairie life, was

43. See Bill North, “The Life and Prints of John deMartelly,” in *Rural America*, ed. Bill North and Stephen Goddard (Lawrence, Kans.: Spencer Museum of Art, 1993).

44. Helm, “An Appraisal of Some Mid-Western Painters,” 90; Federal Writers’ Project, *Kansas: A Guide to the Sunflower State*, 145.

45. Helm, “An Appraisal of Some Mid-Western Painters,” 88; see also North, *The Prints of John F. Helm, Jr.*, 16–17; Broun, “Introduction: Kansas Before Curry,” 17–18.

widely criticized for its inaccurate portrayals of livestock and the unseemly knee-length skirt on an otherwise demure farm wife. *The Tragic Prelude*, which revolved around the now iconic portrait of a wild-eyed John Brown, was the target of far more intense vitriol. Echoing the icy reception given to Curry's homecoming exhibition in 1931, many Kansans chafed at the violence, severe weather, and unmediated fanaticism of the scene. "The murals do not portray the true Kansas," the patriotic Kansas Council of Women stated. "Rather than revealing a law-abiding, progressive state, the artist has emphasized the freaks in its history—the tornadoes, and John Brown, who did not follow legal procedure."⁴⁶ Swayed by such sentiments, the Kansas legislature decided in 1941 to stop further work on the murals; this public rejection by his native state was "absolutely shattering" to Curry and, according to his widow, "really contributed to his death" just five years later.⁴⁷

It is tempting to consider the capitol mural controversy a major turning point in the history of Kansas art. The episode attracted national attention and rekindled national stereotypes of Kansas as narrow, unimaginative, and aesthetically stunted. Moreover, interest in Kansas art and artists seemed to decline rapidly during the 1940s, and the once buoyant confidence in Kansas as a rising art center all but disappeared. While the furor over John Brown and pigs' tails may have contributed to this reversal of fortune in some way, war and the changing artistic fashions that followed it were far more significant factors.

World War II, not surprisingly, had the effect of dampening popular interest in art, in Kansas as elsewhere. "The general atmosphere is just now very unfavorable for us artists," Birger Sandzén reflected in 1942. "Very few people have time to think of art."⁴⁸ When the hostilities finally came to an end, concern for the fine arts revived, but the popularity of Regionalism did not. In the changed circumstances after 1945, spare midwestern landscapes, which seemed so reassuring in the 1930s, suddenly looked naive and retrograde. America's rise as an international power, re-engagement with European artistic trends, and the advent of abstract expressionism—whose emphasis on spontaneity, emotion, and the collective unconscious was the virtual antithesis of Regionalism—left Kansas and its artists far outside the new aesthetic mainstream. Moreover, the sheer profusion of images in postwar popular culture, what historian Karal Ann Marling described as a "visual revolution" engulfing America, "made Benton's or Wood's or Sandzén's periodic reports from the heartland seem profoundly redundant."⁴⁹

The postwar return of Kansas to the margins of the art world was accompanied by renewed assaults, most from East or West Coast critics, on the presumed deficiencies of the state's culture. Allan Nevins, speaking on the occasion of Kansas's territorial centennial in 1954, lambasted the state for its artistic sterility: "All in all, Kansas life of today is as yet deprived of the enrichment by sculpture and music, painting and poesy, which might perpetuate nobilities of the past and nourish dreams of the future."⁵⁰ Few Kansans were inspired by such aspersions to

Interest in Kansas art and artists seemed to decline rapidly during the 1940s, and the once buoyant confidence in Kansas as a rising art center all but disappeared.

46. Quotation in Pickett, "John Steuart Curry and the Topeka Murals Controversy," 38.

47. Bret Waller, "An Interview with Mrs. John Steuart Curry," *Kansas Quarterly* 2 (Fall 1970): 10; see also Pickett, "John Steuart Curry and the Topeka Murals Controversy"; Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism*.

48. Birger Sandzén to Charles Marshall, October 3, 1942, Charles Marshall Papers, University Archives, Kansas State University, Manhattan.

49. Marling, "The Prairie Print Makers," 12.

50. Allan Nevins, "Kansas and the Stream of American Destiny" in *What Kansas Means to Me*, 144.



After World War II individual interest in the visual arts flourished. Painting especially became a favorite hobby for many Kansans, including amateur watercolorist Dwight D. Eisenhower, seen here at work on a landscape in New Mexico in 1962.

defend their state's rich artistic heritage: instead, many Kansas artists endeavored to distance themselves from anything that might be construed as provincial in favor of cosmopolitan tastes, the latest "isms" of the international art scene, and the safety of homogeneity. A profound connection with the local, what Milton Eisenhower described as a sense of being "distinctively Kansan," was thus lost in the postwar rush to embrace notions of a universal "modern art" and prove to the New York establishment just how cultured Kansas really could be.⁵¹

A series of art exhibitions held in 1961 to commemorate the centennial of statehood demonstrated how much both the practice and perception of Kansas art had changed since the 1930s. A show at the Mulvane Museum in Topeka aimed "to present a broad variety of works of art which reflect some of the settlement of the West"; the Mulvane's curators presented Kansas art as a kind of documentary window into the state's past and made no claims for the works' aesthetic excellence or distinctiveness. The centennial exhibition at the Wichita Art Museum featured contemporary Kansas paintings and prints and, doubtless to the relief of its organizers, the show's juror (a dean at the University of Illinois) found not a whiff of provincialism in the galleries: "There seems to be little in the way of a regional flavor to the work. It reflects broad interests and implications which, in a sense, are international." The display at the University of Kansas was even more dismissive of the visual arts traditions of the state: "The presence of art schools, museums, art study groups, collectors and a host of amateur artists of every variety in Kansas would indicate that the art of Kansas did not, like Pallas from the brow of Zeus, spring full-grown upon the earth, but developed from something. What it grew from appear to be a number of very odd and very haphazardly gathered together impulses." "Since that hazy period, a century ago," the exhibition's catalog condescendingly concluded, "Kansas has experienced, at first belatedly but in recent years with increasing rapidity, most of the artistic fashions of the rest of the world."⁵²

In the headlong postwar rush away from a locally rooted, realistic art, the reputations of many prominent Kansas artists suffered. John Steuart Curry, who had always been criticized for his technical ineptitude, came to be regarded as a sentimental illustrator. Birger Sandzén, although a beloved institution in Kansas, received little attention from the postwar art elites.⁵³ Interest also waned in the Prairie Print Makers, especially as its artist members died, dispersed, and abandoned the representational, regionalist printmaking that was the association's hallmark. The group—the most important organizational vestige of the vibrant depression-era art scene in Kansas—quietly disbanded, seemingly unnoticed, in 1966.

51. Milton Eisenhower, "The Strength of Kansas" in *ibid*.

52. *Kansas Centennial Historical Art Exhibition; Kansas Artists Centennial Exhibition* (Wichita, Kans.: Wichita Art Museum, 1961); *Kansiansiana* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Museum of Art, 1961), 3.

53. "Strangely enough," one critic observed in 1961, Sandzén's "totally unrealistic use of color appealed so strongly to his generation that they still consider his arbitrarily drawn works the epitome of traditionalism." See *Kansiansiana*, 18.

Yet ironically, at the very time that the notion of a distinctive Kansas art was losing its popular resonance, the fine arts were becoming more accessible and widely practiced, even ubiquitous, across the state. Art training in schools and universities expanded significantly after World War II; museums, local art centers, and commercial galleries proliferated; and in 1966 the Kansas Arts Commission was established to “increase the support, awareness and outreach of the arts.”⁵⁴ Individual participation in the visual arts also seems to have flourished after the war: art, especially painting, became a favored hobby for many Kansans, including the enthusiastic amateur watercolorist Dwight Eisenhower. As the Wichita artist David Bernard commented in the mid-1960s, “Now that the frontier spirit and atmosphere have disappeared, art . . . is not as rare or as unavailable as it has been in the past.”⁵⁵

With such grassroots vitality and engagement with the arts in Kansas, some sort of reaction against “the international march toward homogeneity and the loss of particularity” was all but inevitable.⁵⁶ An aesthetic and intellectual departure from the postwar artistic mainstream, and a conscious return to Kansas subject matter and a representational idiom began in the 1970s and gained momentum in the 1980s. Crucial to this transition was the gradual rediscovery of a “sense of place,” a renewed acknowledgment of the centrality of landscape, climate, and local traditions to the culture of Kansas. “Over the past two decades,” Robert Smith Bader wrote in 1988, “poets, painters, and photographers have begun to celebrate once again the beauty of the Kansas landscape. . . . Kansans now have ‘permission’ to appreciate their physical environment.”⁵⁷ Economics also had a role in the resurgent sense of a unique, indigenous, and worthy Kansas art. The potential value of a vibrant cultural heritage and a lively artistic community as inducements to tourism and key components of the state’s quality of life was increasingly recognized from the 1970s. Art could apparently be enriching financially as well as culturally, and a distinctive, accessible Kansas art seemed to appeal to local audiences and tourists alike. As one 1976 survey of Kansas art affirmed, revealing both the longstanding sensitivity to being labeled provincial and a resurgent pride in locally grounded artistic expression, “There *is* art in Kansas.”⁵⁸

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RECONSIDERING KANSAS ART

During the past thirty years, just as artists and public audiences have begun to rediscover a distinctive Kansas art, so too have scholars started to reappraise the artistic heritage of the state. A new generation of scholarship published since the 1970s has broadened our conception of who is regarded as an artist, what constitutes art, and how Kansas art should be contextualized historically. Such per-

54. On the Kansas Arts Commission, see <http://arts.state.ks.us/who.html>

55. “Minutes of the Thirty First Annual Meeting of the Kansas State Federation of Art,” May 12, 1966, Kansas State Federation of Art Papers, University Archives, Kansas State University.

56. Bader, *Hayseeds, Moralizers, and Methodists*, xii.

57. *Ibid.*, 141.

58. Jonathan Wesley Bell, “The Art of Kansas,” in *The Kansas Art Reader*, 3. On the economic significance of art, see *The Best of Kansas Arts and Crafts* (Topeka: Kansas Department of Commerce, 1998).



In recent years the art of racial minorities has become more widely acclaimed. The above work, *Bison, Central Plains*, is by Kansas Native American artist Louis Shipshee.

spectives have complicated the received historical narrative and, in the process, greatly enriched our understanding of the state's artistic development, opened new directions for scholarly inquiry, and brought into question not just the boundaries of what we consider "art" but also what we take to be "Kansas."

The longstanding image of the Kansas artist—a white male, formally trained, firmly rooted in the European artistic tradition—no longer appears adequate to encompass the diversity of artists active in the state over the past 150 years. While most accounts of Kansas art written prior to the 1970s at least acknowledge the presence of talented female artists, few focus on the achievements or record the experiences of women painters, printmakers, and sculptors.⁵⁹ Recent scholar-

ship has begun to address this deficiency, casting light on little-known artists (including the painters Clarisse Laurent and Margot Peet) and providing deeper biographical and art historical context for more prominent figures (such as the Topeka printmaker Mary Huntoon). The presence of African Americans and members of other racial minorities in the history of Kansas art has also been more widely acknowledged in the latest scholarly literature. The 1936 WPA *Guide* was virtually the only work prior to the 1970s even to mention a nonwhite artist in the state. In recent years the photographer and Fort Scott native Gordon Parks, the Kiowa–Comanche artist Blackbear Bosin, and Asian Americans currently teaching in state universities (including painter Roger Shimomura) have been hailed as prominent Kansas artists. Furthermore, as historian Marilyn Dell Brady has detailed, the Kansas Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, like its Caucasian counterpart, was active in promoting art appreciation and amateur activity among its members.⁶⁰

59. Federal Writers' Project, *Kansas: A Guide to the Sunflower State*, for instance, mentions no women artists except the daughter of Henry Varnum Poor, who assisted her father in his famous mural work.

60. Joni Kinsey, "Cultivating the Grasslands: Women Painters in the Great Plains," in *Independent Spirits: Women Painters of the American West, 1890–1945*, ed. Patricia Trenton (Berkeley: Autry Museum of Western Heritage in association with the University of California Press, 1995), 243–73; *With Grace and Wit: The Paintings of Margot Peet, 1903–1995* (N.p.: Johnson County Museum of History, 1999); Joyce Fent, *Beyond the Drawing Room: The Art of Mary Huntoon* (Salina: Kansas Reciprocal Art Touring Exhibit Service, 1994). The WPA guide notes that Kansas was the home of Aaron Douglass, "a Negro born in Topeka in 1898 [and a] student of Negro types" who became a nationally renowned painter and muralist. See Federal Writers' Project, *Kansas: A Guide to the Sunflower State*, 144. Among the many books on Gordon Parks, see his autobiography, *Voices in the Mirror* (New York: Doubleday, 1990). On Blackbear Bosin, see Jamake Highwater, *Song From the Earth: American Indian Painting* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1976), 157–64. Roger Shimomura, *Delayed Reactions* (Lawrence, Kans.: Spencer Museum of Art, 1995); Marilyn Dell Brady, "Kansas Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, 1900–1930," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 9 (Spring 1986): 19–30.

Intertwined with this more inclusive understanding of who was an artist was a more capacious scholarly definition of what could be classified as art. Forms traditionally viewed as craft and implicitly denigrated (or simply ignored) have been reassessed as essential components of the artistic heritage of Kansas. Quilting is an excellent example of this transition in both scholarly and public perceptions. Prior to the 1980s quilting in Kansas was generally considered a subsistence activity of farm wives, an immigrant tradition, or an avocation of middle-class homemakers. By the 1990s, as more attention was accorded the artistic activities of women and textile art in general, exhibitions of historical quilts were staged in the state's art museums and the first major scholarly appraisals of Kansas quilting began to appear. A seminal contribution was the 1993 collection *Kansas Quilts and Quilters*, which examined the diversity of the state's quilting traditions, demonstrated the national influence of Kansas quilting, and revealed the artistic contributions of important quilt-makers such as Rose Kretsinger of Emporia.⁶¹

Folk arts—traditional practices, often rooted in immigrant groups, which “reflect and conform to community aesthetics and values”—have similarly attracted serious scholarly interest.⁶² “Non-academic,” self-taught artists working outside an established folk art tradition, such as the celebrated Elizabeth “Grandma” Layton of Wellsville, have also been the subject of more intense scholarly study. Particular scrutiny has fallen on Kansas “grassroots” or “outsider” art, a hard-to-define form that is nonacademic, not rooted in community tastes, often politically motivated, and inventive in its imagery and use of materials. Most famously, S. P. Dinsmoor's “Garden of Eden,” a curious allegorical sculpture built of concrete between 1905 and 1925 on a Lucas street corner, has been extensively researched historically and is widely regarded as one of the premier examples of grassroots art in the nation.⁶³

Other previously overlooked art forms have also been given their due in the scholarship of the past thirty years. Artist-craftsmen such as Lester Raymer of Lindsborg and artist-decorators such as Adam Rohe of Lawrence have been the



By the 1990s more attention was accorded the textile arts and the artistic contributions of important quilters, such as the Mission Quilters of North Newton, whose fine works have been produced for decades. Photo taken in 1961.

61. Barbara Brackman et al., *Kansas Quilts and Quilters* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993).

62. Jennie Chinn and Carl Magnuson, *Kansas Folk Arts Apprenticeship Program: Selected Portraits* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1989), 3; see also Jennie Chinn, ed., *Folk Roots* (Manhattan, Kans.: University for Man, 1982).

63. Don Lambert, *The Life and Art of Elizabeth “Grandma” Layton* (Waco, Tex.: WRS Publishing, 1995); see also Jennie Chinn, ed., *Images of Strawberry Hill: Works by Marijana* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1985). Barbara Brackman and Cathy Dwigans, eds., *Backyard Visionaries: Grassroots Art in the Midwest* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999); Suzanne Hasselle-Newcombe, “Cementing His Political Views: S. P. Dinsmoor and the Garden of Eden,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 24 (Summer 2001): 118–35.



Kansas artists express fascination with their homeland and the prairie landscape in the creation of such works as Terraced Plowing with Grassed Waterway by photographer Terry Evans.

subjects of major exhibitions and rigorous historical research.⁶⁴ Photography has only developed into a consciously artistic pursuit in Kansas over the past several decades, but contemporary landscape photography and historical documentary works (especially from the Dust Bowl era) have attracted growing scholarly attention.⁶⁵ Research has also been published on Kansas sculptors—including Bruce Moore and Waylande Gregory—although, as Faye Davison observed in 1933, “The very topography of the state with its unbroken vistas of prairie, its nondescript architecture and its artistically conservative pioneers has not provided an atmosphere conducive to the germination and growth of sculptural conceptions.”⁶⁶

The horizontality of the Great Plains may not have been particularly inspirational for sculptors, but recent scholarship has argued strongly that the artistic heritage of Kansas is intimately bound up with the state’s unique landscape. Since the 1970s both artists and critics have sought an authenticity of expression and a genuine sense of locality born of a close and lasting connection with the land, skies, and storms of Kansas. “One of the pleasures of having a homeland,” Jonathan Wesley Bell wrote in 1976, “is knowing it intimately like we know no other place on earth. To me the Kansas artist is most exciting when he is revealing the homeland, . . . digging into the earth, examining the land like a lover.”⁶⁷ For artists, such sentiments translated into a reaffirmation of representational images of the Kansas landscape, a fascination with the prairie in photography, and, in the case of “crop artist” Stan Herd, the use of the land itself as canvas and

palette.⁶⁸ For historians of Kansas art, the renewed interest in landscape has meant a closer reexamination of those local artists “who were conscious of the nature of, and of Nature in, the Plains region.”⁶⁹ As a result, over the past three decades

64. Lester Raymer: *A Collection of Essays* (Lindsborg, Kans.: Raymer Society, 1998); John Peterson, “Forgotten Kansas Artist Adam Rohe,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 17 (Winter 1994–1995): 220–35. Also note Gustav Malm, a Lindsborg artist-decorator known especially for his stenciled wall decorations. See Emory Lindquist, *G. N. Malm: A Swedish Immigrant’s Varied Career* (Lindsborg, Kans.: Smoky Valley Historical Publications, 1989).

65. See, among others, *No Mountains in the Way* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Museum of Art, 1975); *Kansas Album* (N.p.: Kansas Banker’s Association, 1977); Constance Schulz, ed., *Bust to Boom: Documentary Photographs of Kansas, 1936–1949* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996).

66. Davison, “What I Know About Kansas Artists,” 45; Howard Wilcox, *Bruce Moore* (Washington, D.C.: Estate Book Sales, 1975); Gene DeGruson, “‘No Greater Ecstasy’: Waylande Gregory and the Art of Ceramic Sculpture,” *Kansas Quarterly* 14 (Fall 1982): 65–82.

67. Bell, “The Art of Kansas,” 10.

68. See Robert Sudlow, *Landscapes in Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1987); *Spiritual Journeys: The Art of Robert Sudlow* (Kansas City, Mo.: ExhibitsUSA, Mid-America Arts Alliance, 2002); Terry Evans, *Prairie: Images of Ground and Sky* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986); Evans, *The Inhabited Prairie* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998); Stan Herd, *Crop Art and Other Earthworks* (New York: Abrams, 1994).

69. Mike Williamson, “Kansas Painters,” in Bell, *Kansas Art Reader*, 101.

scholarly work has proliferated on the artists of the 1920s and 1930s, from icons such as Sandzén and the Prairie Print Makers to less prominent figures such as William Dickerson. Several serious attempts have also been made to restore the reputation of John Steuart Curry, or at least clarify his place in the history of Kansas art.⁷⁰

Foregrounding the connection between Kansas art and the Kansas landscape is not entirely new, of course. Birger Sandzén's singular vision and his tremendous local popularity have long been ascribed to his profound understanding of the Kansas landscape. But while some observers emphasized Sandzén's sympathetic attitude toward the land—"Sandzén has painted Kansas with all the strength and character that is inherent in our countryside"—most contemporary critics saw in Sandzén's work an imperious stance.⁷¹ "When Sandzén looks upon the face of the Kansas prairie," Carl Smalley observed, "he sees the conquest of the wilderness, and he makes the world feel the courage of the Kansas spirit." William Allen White may have best captured the paradoxical pulls of loving the land and simultaneously striving to subdue nature, which seemed to characterize Sandzén's art (as well as the attitudes of many Kansans toward their prairie home):

Birger Sandzén knows that mood of nature. He goes to it unafraid. And comes back triumphant, capturing it, subduing it. . . . He translates its terror and dread without compromise, without understatement. He has come from the plains where things grow rank and strong, from Kansas where he has interpreted ugliness, disharmony, monotony in terms of beauty and yet faithfully and with affectionate wisdom.⁷²

Historians have yet to explore adequately the politics of landscape in Kansas art, as even the extensive scholarly treatments of 1930s Regionalism have tended to focus on its significance in the national imagination rather than in a specifically local discourse. Since the 1970s, at the very same time that more Kansas artists have adopted an explicitly political (usually environmentalist) agenda, few commentators have even attempted to contextualize the past 150 years of Kansas art within the larger political debates and social currents

70. See Lindquist, *Sandzén: An Illustrated Biography*; O'Neill and Foreman, *The Prairie Print Makers*; North, *The Regionalist Vision of William Dickerson*; Anthony Lehman, *Herschel Logan: Man of Many Careers* (Los Angeles: Westerners, 1986). On Curry, see Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism*; Junker, *John Steuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West*; James Dennis, *Renegade Regionalists: The Modern Independence of Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton and John Steuart Curry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).

71. John F. Helm Jr., "The So-Called 'Ugly Subject' in Painting," *Kansas Magazine* (1934): 58.

72. Smalley quotation in Jennie Small Owen, "Birger Sandzén," *Kansas Teacher and Western School Journal* 45 (September 1937): 31. William Allen White, "Introduction," in Birger Sandzén, *In the Mountains: Reproductions of Lithographs and Wood Cuts of the Colorado Rockies* (McPherson, Kans.: Carl Smalley, 1925).



Birger Sandzén joined the faculty of Lindsborg's Bethany College in 1874, where he became a tireless advocate for the fine arts in Kansas, and an acclaimed painter and printmaker. He is especially revered for his vibrant interpretations of the Kansas landscape (below).



"As contemporary Americans struggle to locate themselves within an increasingly complex society, prairies have become a point of cultural identification, embodying long-cherished ideals of harmony with the land."

of the state. Stephen Goddard, for one, has written provocatively of the consistent "mythologizing" strategies of artists attempting to create "a sense of place for rural America," "whether this is a mythology that promotes either an ideology of expansionism, or the faith and virtues of the working class, or respect for natural resources." Joni Kinsey has highlighted the enduring power of the plains landscape as a political touchstone for artists: "As contemporary Americans struggle ever more vainly to locate themselves within an increasingly complex society, prairies have become a point of cultural identification, embodying long-cherished ideals of harmony with the land and, for those with more fortitude, pragmatism, or insight, the vainest follies and tragic mistakes of culture and history."⁷³ Yet much comment on landscape and art in Kansas remains either naively or willfully blind to these political and environmental dimensions; as one representative critic commented blandly in 1976, "The essential Kansas artist is . . . the person who celebrates the land."⁷⁴

The growing interest among art historians in the influence of landscape has also stimulated recent attempts to recontextualize Kansas artists within a larger regional tradition. Scholars such as Kinsey have examined Kansas art more expansively, figuring its evolution as part of a broader prairie or Great Plains pattern. Charles Eldredge has even suggested that Kansas painting and printmaking should be analyzed not just in a midwestern American context but in a transnational one as well, encompassing "the traditions of its hemispheric neighbors" in Mexico as well as the Canadian prairies.⁷⁵ Other commentators, meanwhile, have stressed the significant historical connections between Kansas and the Southwest, especially New Mexico, a place "at once familiar and faraway" that has fascinated Kansas artists since the 1920s.⁷⁶ Although such regional conceptions of Kansas art are not entirely new—Sandzén, for instance, wrote of the "irresistible power of art" drawing together Mexico and the Midwest—the increasingly fluid notions of the artistic boundaries of Kansas should open important new analytical vistas for future research.⁷⁷

For all the new perspectives on the history of Kansas art, many themes in the scholarly literature have remained the same over the long term. Pride in home-grown artists who make an impact on the national scene—from Curry and Sandzén to recent art-world darlings such as David Salle and Alan Shields—has stayed strong. So too has a sensitivity to big-city jibes at the presumed deficiencies of Kansas culture, what Calvin Trillin has identified as a particular midwestern "rubophobia—not fear of rubes, but fear of being taken for a rube." As one 1986 survey of the Wichita art community suggested, "Wichita suffers from a self-im-

73. Stephen Goddard, "Rural American Skyscapes" in North and Goddard, *Rural America*, 10; Kinsey, *Plain Pictures*, 9.

74. Sherrard, "Conversations," 432.

75. Charles Eldredge, *The Floor of the Sky: Artists and the North American Prairie* (Lincoln, Neb.: Hixson-Lied College of Fine and Performing Arts, 2000), 10.

76. Bill North, "The Regionalist Vision of William Dickerson," in North, *Regionalist Vision*, 11; see also Clinton Adams, *Printmaking in New Mexico, 1880–1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991); Dean Porter, Teresa Hayes Ebie, and Suzan Campbell, *Taos Artists and Their Patrons, 1898–1950* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), esp. 193–98.

77. Birger Sandzén, "Foreword," in *Impressions of Mexico*, by Aletheia Garrison and Sue Jean Hill Covacevich (New York: Robert Kelly, 1937).

posed inferiority complex, whose apologetics are not only unnecessary but wearisome." A certain resignation—regarding the state's historically lukewarm patronage of the arts, the tendency of many Kansas artists to defect to more welcoming coastal centers, and the volatile local climate for public art—also is a constant. As the Ellsworth painter and printmaker Charles Rogers once wryly remarked, "I'm used to the kind of people that live here. I like them. They don't buy many pictures, but I like them anyway."⁷⁸

A VIEW TO THE FUTURE

The scholarly reappraisal of Kansas art, although now thirty years in the making, remains an ongoing project. Much recent scholarship, while identifying the lackings and distortions of the received historical wisdom, has taken only the first steps toward a more inclusive, nuanced narrative of the evolution of the visual arts in the state. There are still few substantial studies of Kansas women artists, no major treatments of the African American artistic heritage, and virtually no resources on Hispanic artists and community traditions. Strikingly, very little effort has been made to integrate the Native American artistic legacy into the story of Kansas art: even nationally recognized artists such as Blackbear Bosin figure in few standard accounts of the state's cultural development.⁷⁹

Numerous other topics also demand new scholarly attention. Early Kansas art—especially the position of amateur women artists in the territory and the young state—deserves new historical consideration. The role of traveling exhibitions, state and county fairs, and chautauquas in encouraging art appreciation, ownership, and participation has yet to be adequately explored. Some overlooked genres and media—such as china painting, woodcarving, and other forms practiced largely by women and immigrant groups—need to be reassessed for the historical record. The economic aspects of Kansas art also merit more rigorous historical analysis: patronage, the development of commercial art, and artistic entrepreneurship all need to be considered in specific local and regional contexts.⁸⁰

Issues of reception and audience—Who bought art? What was popular? How did the public respond to changing styles and how did popular tastes influence artistic creation?—have proven challenging for art historians in general and not simply for those studying Kansas. Although important works by Sue Kendall and



In the future, many genres of Kansas art merit in-depth historical analysis. Interesting studies, for example, could be done on the entrepreneurship of Margaret Lowe (above), founder of Marlow Woodcuts in Americus.

78. Trillin quotation in Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism*, 14; Jane Eby and Richard Leslie, "Wichita Artists Share Optimism and Independence," *New Art Examiner* 13 (February 1986): 38; Rogers quotation in Sherrard, "Conversations," 429.

79. An interesting model for future work on Kansas art is Tey Nunn, *Sin Nombre: Hispana and Hispano Artists of the New Deal Era* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), which concentrates on WPA programs in New Mexico.

80. See, for comparison, Chris Rasmussen, "Agricultural Lag: The Iowa State Fair Art Salon, 1854–1941," *American Studies* 36 (Spring 1995): 5–29. Interesting studies could be done, for example, on Wichita art patrons such as Maude Schollenberger and on the entrepreneurship of Margaret Lowe, founder of Marlow Woodcuts in Americus.

Students of Kansas history—whether investigating prohibition, irrigation, or electoral politics—would do well to include consideration of relevant artistic trends.

Karal Ann Marling on depression-era debates over public art have revealed much about the artistic prejudices of Kansans, further work—on different time periods, audiences, and art forms—would greatly enrich our understanding of the place of art in the state’s cultural and social history.⁸¹ Similarly, consideration of the broader “visual culture” of Kansas would better embed the fine arts within the histories of material culture, daily life, and civic discourse. How did graphic arts, advertising, film, television, and the built environment affect Kansans’ “ways of seeing”? How and why was the visual experience of Kansans distinctive, and how did the perceptions of various groups within the state differ? Only by examining the illustrations in Montgomery Ward catalogs, chromolithographs of *Blue Boy*, picture postcards, and the conventions of Hollywood double-features—as well as the paintings of Henry Worrall and the woodcuts of Birger Sandzén—can scholars hope to fathom Kansans’ complex and historically contingent artistic sensibilities.

Taken even more broadly, integrating the story of art into the greater historical narrative of Kansas is a fundamental challenge for future researchers. Breaking down the artificial boundaries that have separated art history from the major social, political, economic, environmental, and intellectual debates of the state’s past is essential. Continued scrutiny of the “dead white males” of Kansas art, either from the traditional biographical or stylistic standpoints, is undoubtedly valuable; more profound insights, however, are likely to be gained from a broader contextualization of Kansas artists, their work, and their audiences rather than from yet more “great man” (or even “great woman”) studies. Likewise, students of Kansas history beyond the cultural realm—whether investigating prohibition, irrigation, or electoral politics—would do well to include consideration of relevant artistic trends, tastes, and iconography in their work.⁸² In the simplest terms, scholars should acknowledge the extent to which art pervades history and history pervades art.

No matter what directions future work on the history of Kansas art may take, scholars will inevitably continue to wrestle with two basic, longstanding questions: Is there such a thing as “Kansas art”? And, if we conclude there is, what makes it distinctive? Virtually all commentators agree that no single style can be said to characterize all Kansas artists, nor can the state’s painters, printmakers, and craftspeople be subsumed within one unified school. “It is probably a mistake to go looking for ‘Kansas Artists,’” David Park Curry wrote in 1976. “A geographic boundary does not necessarily create a cohesive group or a pervading style.”⁸³ Over the past three decades this scholarly quandary has only grown worse as the intellectual boundaries of “art” have grown so capacious as to include not just the traditional visual arts but everything from quilting and metal-smithing to performance art, cemetery art, and even yard art.⁸⁴ One must wonder if any conception of Kansas art that could encompass the formal oil portraits of George Stone, the brutalist metal sculptures of Dale Eldred, and the pink plastic

81. Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism*; Karal Ann Marling, *Wall to Wall America: Post Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), ch. 4–5.

82. See James H. Nottage and Floyd R. Thomas Jr., “‘There’s No Place Like Home’: Symbols and Images of Kansas,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 8 (Autumn 1985): 138–61.

83. David Park Curry, “The Kansas Connection,” in Bell, *The Kansas Art Reader*, 327.


84. John Gary Brown, *Soul in the Stone: Cemetery Art from America’s Heartland* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994); Lu Duerksen and Kathryn Nelson, *Lawn Art, Kansas* (Hillsboro, Kans.: Partnership Book Services, 1996).

flamingos on the lawn down the street could possibly retain any value as an analytical category.

Despite such reasonable concerns, observers past and present have written confidently of a real—if rather hazily defined—Kansas art. In general, scholars, critics, and artists themselves have premised their visions of Kansas art on shared formative influences, common concerns, and certain distinctive characteristics widespread (even if not universal) among the works of the state's visual artists. For some, Kansas's frontier heritage and "pioneer virtues"—"qualities of courage, endurance and a sense of justice"—define the state's artistic tradition.⁸⁵ Others emphasize the very isolation of Kansas from established art centers as a source of creativity for local artists.⁸⁶ Many commentators, as previously noted, see an intimate relationship with the landscape and climate, an ability to decipher the "language of the Kansas atmosphere and the Kansas sky," as the defining trait of the state's art and artists.⁸⁷

For a number of influential writers, however, the common thread in Kansas art is at once more specific and more intangible: according to John Helm, the artists of Kansas share an "interest in the local scene and honesty in portraying it." As Gertrude Newlin put it in 1951, "Kansas artists in no way resemble [each other] except in their sincerity, but it is sincerity that characterizes art in Kansas." Helm, Newlin, and many others perceived an appealing authenticity, a compelling directness and a singular "sense of place" in the profound rootedness of Kansas artists, in their dedication to the immediate and the local, and in their respect and affection for the state, its land, and its people. As one art historian concluded,

Few claims can be made for definable regional "styles," if that word is interpreted as an identifiable and unique way of producing art that is shared by a group of artists working together and communicating artistic ideas to each other. Rather what exists seems to be a sense of shared experience, an identification, however fleeting, with a particular place or region.

William Allen White may have best captured the elusive quality of Kansas art when he wrote admiringly of Wichita painter John Noble, "He held his Kansas ways to the end. . . . He never lost his Kansas accent, nor did he lose his Kansas eyesight."⁸⁸ While future scholarship may reveal much about the state's artistic heritage, no amount of historical research may ever better delineate this undefinable—but undeniably genuine—quality of vision that suffuses Kansas art. 

"Kansas artists
in no way
resemble [each
other] except in
their sincerity,
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85. *Arts and Crafts of Kansas Catalog* (Lawrence: Festival of Kansas Arts and Crafts, 1948), 5, 8.

86. "Possibly the freshness of the work produced in this area now is in part due to this isolation, a situation which largely prohibited young artists from forming preconceived ideas as to the nature of a work of art based on popular movements and fads, and forced [them] to form [their] own ideas out of the depths of [their] own well-examined experiences." See Martha Dellinger, "Search and Research," *Fort Hays Studies, New Series, Art Series 1* (December 1960): 3.

87. Snow, "Kansas Art and Artists, X. Certain Conclusions," *Kansas Teacher* 27 (June–July 1928): 13.

88. Helm, "An Appraisal of Some Mid-Western Painters," 90; Gertrude Dix Newlin, *Development of Art in Kansas* (Lawrence, Kans.: privately published, ca. 1951), 17; Rena Coen, "American Art and Art History" in *Art and Artists in Nebraska: An Exhibition Presented February 11–March 28, 1982, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska—Lincoln*, by Norman A. Geske (Lincoln, Neb.: Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, 1983), 143; *Emporia Gazette*, January 9, 1934.