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An exhibition of work by John Steuart Curry. 1938

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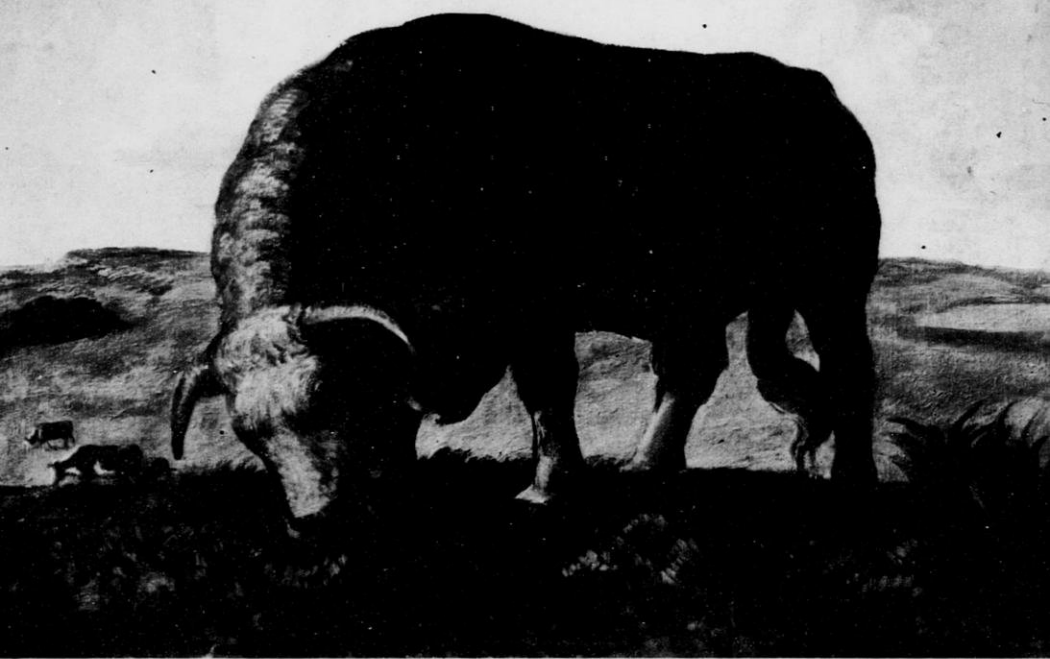
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"ATAX" (1936)

JOHN STEUART CURRY

Artist of Rural Life



The
COLLEGE *of* AGRICULTURE
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN

Presents

An Exhibition of Work

by

JOHN STEUART CURRY

At Seventy-Fifth Anniversary
of the Land Grant Colleges

November 1938
Washington, D. C.



FOREWORD

Our colleges of agriculture and the United States Department of Agriculture are at work today to help bring the farm income up to a level which will provide for a higher standard of living and at the same time for the conservation of the fertility of our soils.

All of these agencies are very keenly interested in the farm income, but surely not in income of and for itself. We all realize that income is but a means to an end, that end being *good life on the farm*.

But let us ask ourselves what are some of the cultural things which contribute toward a good life on the farm and in the farm home. Clearly, interest in a wide range of things is necessary for a broad view of life. Education, if it is to serve us to the fullest, must be broad and must include many things beyond those methods and devices used in making money. Our educational process needs to deal with good literature, art, music, philosophy, history,—the cultural side of life as well as the practical training for better farming.

Recently a group of artists whose lives and interests are rooted in the soil have attracted the attention of the world by making their paintings the means of expressing the sentiments, the activities, and the thinking of farm people.

The atmosphere and the spirit of farm life is recorded and preserved on their canvasses. Because their pictures are true to the lives of farm people these artists are making a definite contribution to the culture of America.

The College of Agriculture at the University of Wisconsin has recognized the important contribution which art and artists may make to the cultural side of farm life by adding to its staff an "artist in residence."

So in an art studio on the agricultural campus of the University of Wisconsin there works one of this group of American

artists, *John Steuart Curry*. Mr. Curry's presence on that campus is a result of the desire on the part of the college of agriculture to stimulate and encourage a more general appreciation of art.

No longer can we be content to think that agricultural education consists alone in teaching the techniques of production, distribution, and consumption. While appreciating the importance of teaching rural youth to grow better crops, select, feed, and care for better livestock, market efficiently, and conserve the fertility of the soil, it is important to know that all these are only means to an end.

In emphasizing the social or cultural values arising out of the improved economic conditions, it is well to keep clearly in mind that this will come about only if the economic process operates in some kind of cultural framework. The achievement of wealth itself contains no guarantee that it will become the means to *more significant living*. We have many examples in the modern world where those having economic success have contented themselves with the power that their position has brought them and have rested solely in the newly found security. As a matter of fact, wealth in careless hands may be a two edged sword wielding destruction to its owner and to society.

Our goal is to help farmers create a rural *economy and a culture* that will enable honest, industrious and intelligent people to live upon the land with a full share of joys and satisfactions. We must help develop agriculture so as to afford opportunity for living standards in the country comparable to those afforded young people who choose other walks of life. We must seek to create conditions on the land that will attract to it superior youth who will utilize their talent in the raising of better livestock and the growing of better crops, the gaining of better markets, and the building of better farms that they may attain and maintain better rural living. In the midst of such a rural economy and culture there will be opportunity for the *maintenance of an acceptable standard of rural living, capable of promoting cultural growth*.

CHRIS L. CHRISTENSEN,
Dean, College of Agriculture,
University of Wisconsin.

JOHN STEUART CURRY

Artist of Rural Life

EARLY LIFE

John Steuart Curry was born in 1897 on a farm near Dunavant, Kansas, the eldest son of an educated family of Scotch Covenanters which had originally emigrated from South Carolina. With the exception of a winter in Arizona at the age of eleven Curry's youth was spent on the family farm in Kansas; he went to high school at Winchester, became a star halfback on the football team, a consistent ten-second performer in the hundred-yard dash and equally outstanding in other track events. At the end of his junior year he left school to study art, first at the Kansas City Art Institute, then at the Chicago Art Institute under Timmons and John Norton, where for two years he managed to support himself meagerly by washing dishes and doing odd jobs wherever he could.

As a special student in 1918 he joined his brother at Geneva College in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, more, it seems, for the sake of playing football than anything else, and remained there until the end of the football season the following year. He then set out in earnest on an artistic career. At Tenafly, New Jersey, he worked with Harvey Dunn, the well-known *Saturday Evening Post* illustrator, and from that time until as late as 1925 Curry made a good living as an illustrator, being particularly adept at the lusty blood-and-thunder scenes for the Western thrillers of popular story magazines. In 1923 he married and as a successful artist moved first to New York then to Westport, where he established a permanent studio of his own.

ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT

As an illustrator, however, Curry soon encountered difficulties. He did not always adhere to the traditional type of ruddy hero or

smooth-faced pretty girl to which the magazine editors and public were accustomed. He was often accused of trying to make "paintings" out of his illustrations. Problems of composition, of pattern, and of color organization began to absorb him more than the stereotyped representation of the story content. Commissions became harder to find, and he was forced to accept whatever was available to make a living. One such project was an assistant to James Daugherty (1925) on a huge wallpaper-like mural for the Cook Travel Agency's booth in the Philadelphia Sesqui-centennial Exposition.

And so perhaps out of sheer necessity he set himself to the serious painting of pictures like "those of the museums." One of the first of these, "The Fence Builders," was painted in 1924 and exhibited in the National Academy the following year. A cursory view of that work will show what Curry himself felt—that he was not yet fully equipped to handle the task of serious painting. Accordingly in October, 1926, financed through the generosity of Seward Prosser of New York, the artist and his wife sailed for Europe and its artistic capital, the much maligned city of Paris.

Curry did not go to Paris for the famed artistic freedom and Bohemian atmosphere of the cafes in the Latin Quarter, but had two definite ideas in mind: One was an earnest desire to learn good draftsmanship, and to that end he immediately entered the studio of the Russian academician Basil Schoukhaeff to begin the long and arduous discipline of anatomy and bone-structure by drawing directly from the model. The other objective was a direct acquaintance with the Old Masters through their works in the museums. He admired Courbet for his solid and convincing realism, Daumier for the sturdy humor and vitality of real life, Delacroix for his color and exciting draftsmanship, and above all the great Rubens in whom all of these qualities were magnificently combined through a remarkably virile and dynamic personality.

RECOGNITION

The results of this training became apparent soon after his return to Westport in June, 1927. Financed this time by his brother, he

produced the famous "Baptism in Kansas," which was exhibited (1928) in the Corcoran Gallery of Washington and praised by Edward Alden Jewell for its vital content and admirable composition. As a result, that same year Curry was granted a liberal stipend by Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney, so that he could carry on his work without being harrassed by financial difficulties. The following year he produced perhaps his best known work, "The Tornado," painted from boyhood memory of how, as he says, "We used to beat it for the cellar when the storm hit." Its exhibition in 1930 at the Whitney Studio Club brought instant and universal applause by the critics, and from that time on Curry's success as a distinctly American artist was an accomplished fact. That year his "Baptism in Kansas" and several other oils and watercolors were purchased for the permanent collection of the Whitney Museum. In 1932 the Metropolitan bought a magnificent Landscape of Barber County. The next year he was awarded second prize at the Carnegie International for his "Tornado." He was invited to teach at Cooper Union and the Art Students League (1932-36) and in the summer of 1936 he was appointed "Artist in Residence" at the University of Wisconsin under a research stipend granted by the University of Wisconsin Trust of the Brittingham Estate and given a studio by the University with full freedom to work and paint as he pleased. As a final reward, perhaps, came his election to the National Academy in March, 1937.

REGIONALISM

Curry's interest in the scenes and surrounding of his boyhood in Kansas was recognized already with the Century of Progress Exhibition of the Chicago World's Fair in 1933 as one phase of a new indigenous art movement growing out of the Middle West which became known as Regionalism. In Curry's work, along with that of such popular contemporaries as Thomas Benton, Grant Wood, Charles Burchfield and Reginal Marsh, Regionalism came to incorporate a concentrated interest by the artist on a recognizable reality drawn from the particular locality in which each lived, as opposed to the experimental mannerisms which had

characterized the School of Paris and the international art market for so many years. This attitude appears not only in Curry's "Baptism" and "Tornado" pictures, but also in many of his later works which depict the Kansas scene. The majority of these are developments from a series of sketches made on two successive visits to his home state. One was a trip in 1929 to sketch the floods in the Kaw River valley, from which the well-known "Mississippi" in the St. Louis Museum was painted (1935). A second trip in 1930 produced the sketches of the Heart Ranch in Barber County, which were used for the "Spring Landscape" in the Metropolitan, and the scenes of devastation left by an actual tornado which had just passed near his home.

But Curry had developed this attitude of the Regionalist from a geographical to a psychological concept. Witness the marvelous series of drawings and paintings he did of the circus, when, in the spring of 1932, he followed the Ringling Brothers-Barnum and Bailey Circus on its New England tour. These works not only depict the color and pageantry of the Big Tent, but beyond that the dramatic power and breathless tension of its great acts. The remarkable "Flying Codonas" in the Whitney Museum and the countless preliminary sketches made for that composition are some of the best examples. The extraordinary technical character of his frescoes in the Bedford High School of Westport and the realistic symbolism of his new murals in Washington likewise reflect a spirit beyond what this group concept of Regionalism can include.

FACTUAL ROMANTICISM

If one surveys the work which John Curry has accomplished in the last ten years, even including the early illustrations, he would undoubtedly be impressed by two salient characteristics: one is an outspoken and uncompromisingly factual realism, the other is a compelling love and sympathy for whatever the artist chooses to portray. Curry's love is that of a profound and genuine Romanticist: instead of the traditional sickroom bouquet he painted a magnificent flower still life of his own and carried it himself to his

wife who lay seriously ill in the hospital. He is not bashful about revealing his love for his father and mother, as he portrays them in countless ways at home on the farm. There is a homesick yearning for the barnyard, the fields surrounding it, and the sweeping Kansas prairies in the distance.

This emotional state has none of the sweet melancholy of nineteenth-century Romanticism nor the artificial stylization of contemporary Neo-Romanticism in Paris, but is held in rigid discipline by realistic fact. Every scene, character or idea in Curry's paintings is identifiable in his mind by a definite object or actual situation, regardless of whether the scene be "Fighting Hogs" or "Flying Codonas." And that is what makes each work so genuine and convincing. One does not need, for instance, any sophisticated "sense of beauty" to feel the terrific power, clean draftsmanship and solidity of form revealed in his football sketches; the excitement of the game is there and the work will weather the critical gaze of the football coach as well as it will the aesthetic analysis of the art critic.

Even in his highly historical or symbolic murals, such as those which he has recently completed for the Department of Justice Building in Washington, the collective concept of "Westward Migration" is interpreted by a group portrait centered in the youthful figures of his father and mother, burned into his memory by the exciting tales his father had told of their earlier life. Similarly Curry's idea of Justice is built up around the lynching mob and the bloodhounds used to run down the culprit who collapses at the feet of the protecting judge. The preliminary sketches for his new murals in the Kansas state capitol indicate a similar combination of dramatic power and monumental form which promises to be his greatest single enterprise.

Thus, by the dramatic sublimation of realistic content, Curry has probed deeply into the vast and inexhaustible realm of the emotions. His art is not only a product of external Regionalism, but has taken root in a cultural soil which lies psychologically far

deeper than the geographical divisions of race and landscape. John Steuart Curry stands today unique in American art, a leading figure on the threshold of a hitherto undeveloped expression based on a new principle of Factual Romanticism.

LAURENCE E. SCHMECKEBIER,
Department of Art History,
University of Wisconsin.

CHRONOLOGY AND SIGNIFICANT WORKS

- 1897 Born November 14 on farm near Dunavant, Kansas; son of Smith Curry and Margaret Steuart Curry.
- 1908 Spent the winter on the family farm at Scotsdale, Arizona.
- 1916 Left Winchester High School to enter the Kansas City Art Institute, stayed for one month, then to the Chicago Art Institute, where he worked with Timmons and John Norton.
- 1918 Entered Geneva College, Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania. Played football for two seasons.
- 1919 December, left college to work in studio of Harvey Dunn at Tenafly, New Jersey, and began career as illustrator for popular magazines.
- 1923 Married Clara Derrick and moved to New York City.
- 1924 Painted "The Fence Builders." Moved to Westport, Connecticut. Series of watercolors from Cooperstown and Lake Ostego, New York.
- 1925 "The Fence Builders" exhibited in the National Academy. Worked as assistant to James Daugherty on a mural for the Philadelphia Sesquicentennial Exposition. First rendering of "Hogs Killing a Rattlesnake" (watercolor).
- 1926 October, went to Paris and worked in the Russian Academy of Basil Schoukhaeff. Anatomical studies, drawings from the model and many watercolors. Influenced particularly by the works of Courbet, Daumier, Delacroix, and Rubens in the Louvre.
- 1927 June, returned to Westport after one week in London.
- 1928 Exhibited "Baptism in Kansas" in the Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D. C., and received first public recognition. Granted a two-year stipend by Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney.
- 1929 Six weeks' visit to his home in Kansas and did series of sketches of the Kaw River valley floods. Painted: "The Tornado," "Portrait of Father and Mother," "Kansas Stockman," "Road Workers Camp" (owned by University of Nebraska).
- 1930 Exhibited "The Tornado" (Hackley Art Gallery, Muskegon, Michigan) at the Whitney Studio Club and received

- universal acclaim from the critics. Second visit to his home in Kansas, did sketches of the Heart Ranch in Barber County and the devastation left by an actual tornado near home. Purchase of "Baptism in Kansas," "Kansas Stockman" and several watercolors by the Whitney Museum. One-man show at Ferargil Gallery, New York.
- 1931 Second one-man show at the Ferargil Gallery.
- 1932 Accompanied the Ringling Brothers-Barnum and Bailey Circus on its spring tour through New England. Many sketches and paintings: "The Flying Codonas," "Circus Elephants," "Entrance to the Circus," and others exhibited at Ferargil Gallery in the fall. Purchase of "Spring Shower," landscape of the Heart Ranch in Barber County, by the Metropolitan Museum, New York. Appointed to teach at Cooper Union (until 1934) and the Art Students' League (until 1936) in New York. Death of Clara Curry.
- 1933 Awarded second prize at the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh for "The Tornado."
- 1934 Married Kathleen Shepard of Westport. Painted first frescoes, "Tragedy" and "Comedy," in the auditorium of Bedford Junior High School in Westport. Also painted "Line Storm" and "Kansas Cornfield."
- 1935 Began work on two murals for the Department of Justice Building in Washington: "Westward Migration" and "Justice Defeating Mob Violence." Served on jury of the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh. Painted "Sanctuary," "The Fugitive" and "The Mississippi" (St. Louis Museum).
- 1936 Finished two P. W. A. murals for Norwalk High School: "Ancient Chemistry" and "Modern Hat Industry." Appointed "Artist in Residence" in the College of Agriculture, University of Wisconsin, through trust fund of the Brittingham Estate. Elected associate of the National Academy of Design.
- 1937 Completed murals for the Department of Justice Building. Painted: "The Stallion" and "Flower Still Life." Series of football sketches executed during the spring football practice of the university teams at Camp Randall Stadium in Madison. Commissioned to paint two new murals for the Department of Interior Building in Washington and a series of monumental frescoes for the Kansas state capitol in Topeka.

PAINTINGS ON EXHIBIT

"Kansas Threshing Outfit"

Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches
Signed and dated, 1933

Oil sketch painted from nature on his uncle's farm near Winchester,
Kansas.

"Sunrise"

Oil on canvas, 37½ x 59 inches
Signed and dated, 1935

Painted from sketches of Kansas landscape in Barber County made
in 1930.

"Ajax"

Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches
Signed and dated, 1936

Painted from sketches of Barber County in Kansas made in 1930.