John Steuart Curry
At Home in Wisconsin Exhibition at Museum of Wisconsin Art
June 27–September 14, 2014

John Steuart Curry arrived at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1936 to be the nation’s first university artist-in-residence. He was hired by the College of Agriculture rather than the art department. University President Glenn Frank and College of Agriculture Dean Chris Christensen believed that art could help forge a bond between the University and the State’s farmers and that Curry was the ideal candidate because of his farm background and artistic accomplishments.

Kansas-born Curry was hailed alongside Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton as an outstanding proponent of American Regionalism. Popular in the late 1920s and early 30s, Regionalism advocated painting rural subjects in the “heartland” and was seen as a particularly American genre which rejected both elements of big-city industrialization and European-inspired modernism. For Curry, Regionalism meant “the artist must paint the thing that is most alive to him...the fullness of our life and experiences.” In short, he painted what was around him, not what was beyond his personal knowledge.

Growing up on a farm, art studies in Chicago and Paris, and a growing national reputation made Curry the ideal choice for the experimental artist-in-residence position. His contract was wonderfully vague: continue his own work, paint murals, hold workshops, encourage amateur artists, and foster greater cultural appreciation among farmers and rural residents. In essence, he was to be a roving ambassador for art, regardless of place or practitioner.

Curry loved Wisconsin. He engaged with the University’s students and football team and with the State’s rural artists, many of whom produced their art at the end of a hard day’s work. Curry also connected with the land; he hunted, camped, and fished. He felt appreciated and at home in Wisconsin.

John Steuart Curry loved football. He played both in high school and at Geneva College in Pennsylvania. When Curry arrived at Madison in 1936, Harry Stuhldreher was head coach of the football team, a position he had achieved after a stellar career at Notre Dame where he had been quarterback and one of the famous “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” under Knute Rockne.

Over the 1940-41 season, Wisconsin achieved a 4-4 record for the year, beating Marquette, Purdue, Illinois, and Indiana, but losing to Iowa, Northwestern, Columbia, and Minnesota. There were 47 players on the squad, including George Paskvan who later played briefly for the Packers, and David Schreiner (Number 74) a two-time All American, who was drafted by
Detroit in 1943. Schreiner was killed in the battle of Okinawa in June 1945 having enlisted in the Marines.

As an artistic subject, football appealed to Curry’s love of the spectacle that had attracted him to the circus: the color, movement, choreographed plays and sense of drama and uncertain outcomes. He spent hours sitting on the sidelines sketching plays and players, and, like any other work of art, reveled in the challenge of creating the perfect composition from seemingly chaotic components.

**The Wisconsin Idea**

“Scholarship for the sake of the state and the people is refined patriotism.”

—Thomas C. Chamberlin, University of Wisconsin President, 1887–1892

The Wisconsin Idea was an overarching philosophy that the University of Wisconsin could play an active and positive role in the social, political, and economic betterment of its citizens. Kindled during the late 19th century and widely promoted during the early 20th century, this broad initiative originated with the development of a successful and widespread extension system. Grounded in utilitarian agricultural courses, the extension programs did much to diversify and improve horticulture and dairying throughout the state.

In essence, the boundaries of the campus became the boundaries of the state.

The idea that a state-funded university should also contribute to an improved government for the people was evident during the governorships of Progressive Republican political leaders Robert ‘Fighting Bob’ La Follette and Francis McGovern. Governor La Follette stated it was his policy to “bring all reserves of knowledge and inspiration of the university more fully to the service of the people, to appoint experts from the university wherever possible.” This productive partnership between law and learning resulted in the first functional workers’ compensation program, laws to regulate factory safety, forest and waterpower conservation acts, and limited working hours for women and children. The Wisconsin Idea also rippled into future national policies such as Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, John F. Kennedy’s New Frontier, and Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society.

By John Steuart Curry’s arrival in 1936, Wisconsin’s Progressive movement was waning, but the tenets of the Wisconsin Idea had permeated throughout the university culture creating fertile soil for the growth of a unique partnership between art and agriculture that would enrich the rural population.

**Youth Helps Rebuild a World**
Youth Helps Rebuild a World is a prime example of John Steuart Curry’s talent for bestowing epic proportion and mythic qualities on ordinary people, places, and events. The core of Curry’s philosophy on painting was subject over style. He always looked for recognizable symbols to reach the common man. Fellow artist and friend Thomas Hart Benton was of the opinion that Curry’s work “lived by and through the sympathetic response of those who viewed it.”

In with Youth Helps Rebuild a World, Curry looked with hope to the future and promoted a significant role for the Wisconsin farmer in healing the scars of war. This sentiment is echoed in the direct and determined gaze of the mural’s subjects. Painted for the 1946 Wisconsin State Fair, the mural portrays the younger generation moving forward from the farms of Wisconsin to aid the recovery of battle-scarred Europe. Such a positive outlook from Curry is not surprising.

He engaged with the students at UW-Madison and appreciated the optimism of youth and would also have been aware of the numerous churches in Wisconsin that sent people and money to help rebuild Europe. Youth Helps Rebuild a World was painted and installed in August of 1946, just days before Curry’s death.

**Jimmy Demetral**

For such a prolific artist, Curry did relatively few portraits. Those that exist are of people who were important to him—such as College of Agriculture Dean Chris Christensen. Jimmy Demetral was someone Curry held in high esteem and therefore deemed worthy of painting. Born in Greece, Demetral won the World Championship in wrestling in the middleweight division in 1908 and came to the US with only $1.50 to his name after buying food for his fellow immigrants who were forced to eat horsemeat on the voyage. In the 1920s, Demetral arrived in Madison to pursue a career as a wrestler and wrestling promoter.

That Curry would find Demetral an intriguing character is not surprising. In the early 1930s, Curry spent a lot of time painting and drawing circuses. Demetral’s colorful life as a wrestler—he is rumored to have wrestled bears for $100, humans for $25—in addition to his kind-hearted nature (he raised money for children with tuberculosis, polio and mental disabilities with an annual wrestling show), would have greatly appealed to the artist. In the mid-1940s, Demetral worked as a masseur and Curry, whose health was declining, would get a “grik rubdon” or Greek rub-down from the famous wrestler.

When this portrait was painted, Demetral was 54; he retired from wrestling at age 60. A park in Madison is named after him as is an athletic award at the University.

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