

John Stewart Curry

by Patricia Junker, *American Art Review*, June, 1998

The career of John Stewart Curry spanned only two decades: from 1924, when he first exhibited at the National Academy of Design in New York, until his death in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1946. They were, however, decades that shook the foundation of American life and art. Defined by the Great Depression and the country's entry into World War II, they were years of upheaval that would reshape the economic, political, and social structure of the nation and challenge the spiritual, and moral grounding of all humanity.

As much as he was spiritually and artistically a product of the Middle West,

Curry was an artist of these times. Born in rural Dunavant, Kansas, in 1897 and raised in a family of devout Scottish Calvinists, he appeared to struggle in the face of the nation's economic ruin and social upheaval to find meaning in religious faith. He confronted the challenges of modern life in subjects ranging from religious fanaticism to bigotry, from environmental destruction to war, exposing the real danger posed by the self-righteous. He developed as a painter amidst sometimes bitter national and international debate on the appropriate language for modern art, realism or abstraction.

Through two decades of dramatic change, Curry held fast to an art that took as its foundation the relation of humankind to nature and of men and women to one another. Inevitably this son of a Kansas stockman saw that interconnectedness most clearly in rural life. In his paintings, inspired by the lives of people of rural Kansas, Curry gave form to issues that extended far beyond America's Middle West. He articulated both the complex concerns of his generation and universal human experiences. He elevated the rural Midwestern landscape to a higher level of discourse—to a consideration of social and spiritual values.



Curry, *Tornado*, 1929, o/c, 461/4 x 601/2, Muskegon Museum of Art, Hackley Picture Fund purchase.



Curry, *Baptism in Kansas*, 1928, o/c, 40 x 50, Whitney Museum of American Art, gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney.

At its best Curry's art has the power to transcend region, and that, in the end, is what makes it such a revealing window into a time and a place. *Baptism in Kansas*, painted in 1928, established Curry as a master storyteller. Drawing upon his innate feeling for the human form, his profound formative experiences as a Scottish Calvinist, and the growing national interest in religious fundamentalism, Curry found in this religious rite a potent subject for his art. Baptism by submersion in a farm tank in rural Kansas was, like many of the subjects of his early canvases, a recollection of Curry's childhood.

The elaborate figural composition was a supreme test of drawing skills he had honed at the Paris academy of the Russian instructor, Basil Schoukhaieff, and the narrative detail pointed to his skill as a popular magazine

illustrator, an occupation that had engaged Curry to this time. The popularity of these canvases in New York struck a chord with the country's urban, East Coast intellectuals. Curry's Middle West, like that of America's collective imagination, was a landscape and a society stripped bare, revealing essential characteristics that shaped a national character—cultivation of the land, community, simplicity, and faith. Yet, in his art and in his life, Curry was, as he put it, driven "past the ballyhoosers of the status quo...to the attractions at the other end of the fair ground." [John Steuart Curry, "An Address Before the Art Association of Madison, Tuesday, 19 January 1937," typescript, p.6, Curry Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as AM), microfilm roll 165, no frame number.] Even from his vantage point in the East Coast artists' colony of Westport, Connecticut, where he spent the first half of his career, Curry saw that the most revealing aspects of the American social landscape were to be found not on his immediate horizon but well beyond—in the Midwest, and on the fringe.

The restive, even dispossessed farm families he encountered on his 1929 trip home to Kansas were one kind of marginal group. The troupers of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus, with whom the artist traveled for a few months in 1932, were another. These individuals inspired a group of genre paintings whose subjects are easily regarded as members of the American scene's sideshow. Migrant road menders, uprooted farmers, and circus itinerants all contradicted traditional views of stable family and community. Their often pathetic lives and heroic survival served as living parables of faith tested—as emphatic reminders that God works in strange ways.

The years between 1936 and 1940 were a time of intense national self-reflection. In the wake of the Great Depression and facing the threat of world war, Americans increasingly looked to the nation's past for protection against the trials of the present. Given unprecedented support by the federal government's New Deal programs, public art—especially public mural art—became an important forum in these years for the expression of what were considered defining national experiences, history, and beliefs. When Curry turned to grand historical themes in his painting, it was primarily to serve public mural projects. The subjects he chose were less American historical narratives than they were broad statements about human character.

Through one of the mural projects for the Federal Arts Program, Curry created murals for the United States Department of Justice building in Washington, D.C., under the Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture. For this commission, he was assigned specific subjects to develop: "The Migration Westward, the Settlement of Land, and the Bringing of Justice," for one panel, and "The Freeing of the Slaves and the Coming of the New Immigrants" for the second. Curry's conception of *The Freeing of the Slaves* with its central figure of a triumphant black man astride dead white Union and Confederate soldiers, was, however, not accepted by the government's Commission of Fine Arts. Executing a second design, Curry depicted a judge in his robe on the steps of the courthouse holding back an angry mob.



Curry's *John Brown*, (left) painted in 1937-1939 as part of his ambitious mural program for the Kansas Statehouse, is the artist's most moving and memorable historical image. John Brown is the central figure of one mural panel depicting what Curry called "The Tragic Prelude" to Kansas statehood. In his portrayal of Brown, Curry does not offer a narrative to impart a point of view. Rather, he presents only a character study—an image of wild fanaticism—and asks the viewer to attach to the image his own reading of its larger significance.

With the appointment of John Steuart Curry as artist-in-residence within the College of Agriculture in 1936, the University of Wisconsin initiated a bold and unique plan to encourage the visual arts in rural areas. Curry was not a member of the university's art faculty; he was not employed to teach art to university students. His role in the educational process was not confined to the classroom. Instead, Curry was there to broaden the cultural awareness of future farmers and to spur the creative potential of rural men and women. Chris L. Christensen, Dean of the College of Agriculture at the

Curry, *John Brown*, 1939, oil and tempera on canvas, 69 x 45, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund.



Curry, *The Runway*, 1932, oil on masonite-process fiber building board, 30 x 397/8, Swarthmore College Art Collection.

University of Wisconsin commented:

John Steuart Curry, "artist in residence," College of Agriculture, University of Wisconsin! That title has intrigued many people, John Steuart Curry, on the staff of the College of Agriculture! The alliance amazes them. The explanation is simple. This is one of the most interesting experiments...that has been by any institution of higher learning in the country. [Chris L. Christensen, "Artist in Residence," *Demcourier* 11, no.2 (April 1941): 15.]

Curry said upon accepting the appointment, "I am glad to be associated with the College of Agriculture. While in my youth I fled from the arms of agriculture to the more seductive charms of art, now I return." [AAA, op. cit.] The position gave Curry three important things that should have energized his art: a subsidy to paint, an opportunity to steep himself in rural life, and a profound sense of purpose. He threw himself into the position with a kind of missionary zeal, and from his barn-like studio on the Madison, Wisconsin campus, enthusiastically played his part "as gracious host to art lovers and future farmers of Wisconsin." [Christensen, op. cit., p. 15.] Curry's experience in Wisconsin enabled him to put into practice what he had long advocated in theory: that art should be made relevant to the daily lives of rural men and women. Both Curry and Christensen came to measure the value of the artist's appointment by his accessibility. Curry's studio was always open. He gave freely of his time to Wisconsin's art enthusiasts even when this lessened his own productivity.



Curry, *Chris L. Christensen*, 1941, oil and tempera on canvas, 59 x 42, College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

"John Curry has the drive of those who love the world better than Art," his friend, painter Thomas Hart Benton, wrote admiringly in 1941, "and who will risk innovation for the sake of that love." [Thomas Hart Benton, "Wisconsin Landscape," *Demcourier* 11, no.2 (April 1941): p.15.] In the latter half of his career, Curry found innovation enough in the grand social experiment that was the University of Wisconsin's artist-in-residence program. The experience did not suggest any new direction for his art. Rather, Curry's work there—cultivating the creative spirits of the people of rural Wisconsin and painting for a Midwestern audience—validated what he had created up to that point.

These were years of reflection rather than innovation for his art. They were also years of discouragement, as the painter struggled with public scrutiny. The Wisconsin years should have signaled fulfillment for a populist like Curry, but, ironically, experiences in the last decade of his life shook his faith in populism. Although Curry's works brought him critical acclaim and the admiration of fellow artists, they failed to garner him wide public acceptance. They failed to appeal to "his people." Fellow Kansans denigrated his Topeka murals, driving him away from the project in disgust, his work never completed. Curry could not recover from the hurt. *Wisconsin Landscape*, painted at the request of a group of the country's leading agriculturists, was refused by those who had commissioned it.



Wisconsin Landscape, 1937-1939, o/c, 42 x 84, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, George A. Hearn Fund.

Writing to the artist Clare Leighton a year before his death, Curry reflected on his Wisconsin experience in a way that suggests personal disillusionment:



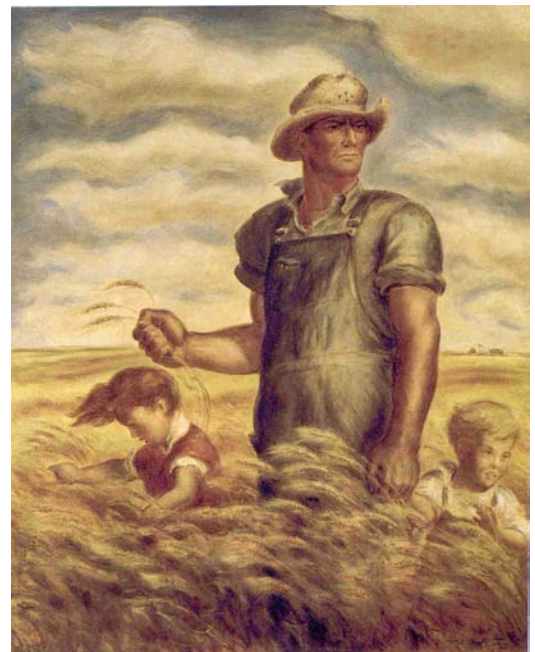
Curry, *The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne*, 1928-40, o/c, 38 x 52, The Warner Collection of Gulf States Paper Corporation.

The main thing is to get something done as an artist. It has been my experience and observation that what really counts is your own work. You can lecture to cheering mobs and go around making wonderful impressions on this and that group, but the only thing that counts and the only thing that is remembered is what you have accomplished as an artist. You could spend a beautiful lifetime lecturing to women's clubs and it would be lovely until somebody came along with the latest thing. I do not want to appear too cynical because I find the great majority of people are anxious to learn but also there are a great many people filling in time and will not it at your expense. [John Steuart Curry, Madison, Wisc., to Clare Leighton, Durham, N.C., 19 May 1945, letter in collection of Mrs. John Steuart Curry.]

By 1936 Curry had earned official recognition as a painter of and for rural people. Yet he died only a decade later misunderstood and disappointed. Upon his death in 1946, the Wisconsin State Journal paid him the following tribute: He was not content in the artist's attic. He was a stranger to the ivory tower; He knew what art means in its deeper significance and he toiled to show it to others, to inspire an appreciation and an active interest in it for thousands of people to whom it had been something a million miles away from their own lives his Wisconsin rural artists, farmers and village housewives were his pride and joy. A youngster he could help with a brush or an idea was a thrill to him beyond his biggest mural. ["John Steuart Curry," Wisconsin State Journal, 30 August 1946.]



Parade to War, 1938



Our Good Earth, 1940-41