

All in a Day's Work: Images of Farming and Ranching from the Collection of the Beach Museum of Art

“Farming is healthy and moral and respectable and in the long run may become profitable.”
Chase County Leader, 1871

From the 1920s through the 1960s, artists captured the agricultural heritage of Kansas and the surrounding region. This exhibition features works on paper — prints, watercolors, and drawings — depicting farming and ranching. Included are Regionalist artists Thomas Hart Benton, John Stuart Curry, and Grant Wood, as well as Kansas artists William Dickerson, John Helm, Herschel Logan, and E. Herbert Deines. Many of the artists were members of the Prairie Printmakers, and some were involved in the Works Progress Administration.

During the 1930s Kansas native John Steuart Curry, and fellow Regionalist artists Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton, brought the Midwest region to the national forefront, with an emphasis on rural beauty, work ethic, and agriculture. Their idealized work was popular on the urban east coast, where it showed in stark contrast to the breadlines and unemployment of the Great Depression.

Other artists portrayed the region more realistically. Herschel Logan created numerous prints that depicted 1930s Kansas and included the reality of dust storms and tornados. Steven Dohanos and Joe Jones, in a more Social Realist style, illustrated how difficult the farming life was.

Of special interest are images that depict farm equipment from the 1920s and 1930s such as the complicated threshing rigs run by steam tractors and sorghum mills powered by horse or mule. Other works, such as those by William Dickerson and Mary Huntoon, reflect industrial growth and technological change in agriculture during the 1940s to 1960s.

To bring the exhibition to life, the labels include quotes by period writers such as William Allen White, poets from the period, and farmers like Mil Penner and Lawrence Svobida, who lived during the period. Photographs by J. Wes McManigal of Horton and Bill Long of Hoxie and from materials from Kansas State University's Hale Library Special Collections are also included.

The Art and Artists

Rural subject matter was one response to critics, especially art critic Thomas Craven, asking artists to look not to Europe but to American soil and create art that was true to the American experience. While the movement predated the Depression, it later served the needs of the country, providing an affirmation of what was an imperiled America.

In addition, one of the first casualties of the Depression was the American art market. The public wanted an art of the people, realistic in style, with the American experience at the root. The image of work, both rural (Regionalists) and industrial (Social Realists) connected working people of all types.



John Steuart Curry in the studio and in the field.

American Scene painters dealt with regionalism in different ways. Some, like Curry, Benton and Wood romanticized rural life. According to Curry, the 1930s provided plenty of dramatic topics in the area of man vs. nature and man vs. man. Others like William Dickerson and Bernard Steffen focused on the aesthetic design of rural life. Some artists were very political, to the point of being Communists like Joe Jones. Others were very matter-of-fact, while still others, like Herschel Logan, were more nostalgic.

Regionalism proved to be a double-edged sword for both Curry and Benton. The public wanted a style and subject matter they could relate to, but sometimes the reality was too much for them. Curry's storms, evangelical baptisms, and John Brown and Benton's all too violent folktales and myths often repelled Midwesterners while fascinating the New Yorkers. Benton once responded to the comment that his murals were loud and not in good taste, "They represent the U.S. which is also loud and not in 'good taste'." (*Smithsonian Magazine*, April 1989)

Although American realism lost its popularity by the end of the 1930s, many of the artists continued to produce work with similar subject matter and style for decades.

Printmaking

Printmaking was an affordable means of creating and distributing art which the WPA sponsored. Wichita, Kansas, with its lithography companies which printed technical manuals, was a hotbed of printmakers. Hence, the importance of printmaking in Kansas art history.

A number of printmaking organizations are represented in this exhibition. The Prairie Print Makers was formed in Wichita, Kansas, at the end of 1930. Their goal was to create quality prints which were affordable and available to all Americans. They issued 34 gift prints between 1931 and 1965. In 1939, with the goal of generating an accessible democratic art that would speak to ordinary people, Associated American Artists began producing limited addition prints for as little as \$5, with American artists, particularly those of the American Scene, creating hundreds of prints over the years. Finally, the Friends of Art at Kansas State University now know as the Friends of the Beach Museum of Art, formed a print club in 1934, selling the first gift prints for 50 cents to students and \$1 for non-students. Each year a Kansas or regional artist created a limited edition print, and the tradition continues today.

Breathing Kansas by Artful Goodtimes

For the Hitz family of Montezuma

*“Chants going forth from the centre of Kansas, and thence equidistant shooting in pulses
of fire ceaseless to vivify all...”*

-Walt Whitman

Work Work Work Work Work Work Work Work
is the ethic that drives the tractors
crustbusting across the buffalo wallows
Breathe it in.

It's Kansas tumbling big skies in between cottonwoods. The high plains where all is
horizon. Mud track farm roads that run on forever.
In Garden City, Hutchinson, Emporia pollyannas in pigtailed
still dreaming up tornadoes & along US #50
monuments to wagon ruts still cut in the clay of the Santa Fe Trail.
All the Kansa
people of the South Wind
marched off to Oklahoma, intermarried
leaving only stores & the mystery of names:
Topeka, Chicopee, Oskaloosa.
Breathe it in.

The centerfold primer wheat heart of America.
Whitewashed steeples where the minister stands
shaking hands loose from pockets.
Windmills. Feedlots. Grain elevators.
Blue out to grass & wind blowing strong.
Out here in the plowed fields
night's a morse code of farm lights mimicking stars.
Daytime thunder crackles. Clouds plume & vanish
Breathe it in.

It fills the lungs with distance. Legs stretch out
with the Kaw, the Smoky Hill, the Arkansas. Rivers drying up
go underground as the pumps feed the pipes that circle like vultures.
Fears root in with the sinking water table. Dwindling fuel.
Dust storm eyes irrigate themselves.
But in a good year one's whole field of vision
gone bushel-green & sprouting. Sunflowers & futurities.
Snow on the milo & heads on the stalks. Threat of hail & harvest rush.
Breathe it in.

Breathe in this land
this rolling pasture
this underneath us steady earth heaving like the Mother sea
prairie swells rippling with grain.

Breathe it in.

Know this home for what it is: scarred belly of the Turtle.
The wide-angle open-eye buffalo heart of the continent.

Let it breathe within you.

Be inspired
by what breathes beneath your feet.

From *Embracing the Earth*, Artful Goodtimes, Berkeley, CA: Homeward Press, 1984

Dear Sir,

We have been reading your replies and comments on Mr. Wallace and F. D. Roosevelt's ideas and we think you have given them something to think about besides helping the man with the money.

There is something I would like for you to get direct to F.D.R. I am 58 years old. Thro the depression what I had gotten ahead shrunk until I had to work on the C.W.A. [Civil Works Administration] last winter. We are just a little proud, but poor, but last winter we skimped along and I bought a cow. She is a mighty good Gurnsey[sic]. Gives when fresh about 5 gal. a day and tested b-2. We made about 2# butter a week and I work[ed] for a man for a piggy sow. She raised me 9 pigs. We set 400 eggs hatched out 350 chicks. Well I was forced to sell my pigs average 70#. They offered me >5¢to \$1.00 a head. I got a few days work thro threshing, and silo filling. Managed to keep my cow and have nearly gotten the chickens to laying stage. Now we have to sacrifice the chickens or the cow. The cow would probably bring \$15 if anyone will buy her. What I am aiming at is this, if we had the feed for both they would be skimping again this winter, keep [me] off the C.W.A. work. Now they want a man to get off the work but they don't help us so the ones that are willing to save and deny ourselves and family can be independent of any aid.

I had neuritis all last winter and worked days that I could hardly lift a pick and shovel and I have it so bad now that I could not work in the rocks.

Mr. Casement this is the case with a lot of people of my age. We do not want C.W.A. work but we would like to hold on to the things we have that will make us an independent living. Proud, yes, but poor.

Written by J.W. Smith, Eudora, Kansas to Dan Casement*, August 12, 1934, from the Morse Department of Special Collections, Hale Library, Kansas State University

**Dan Casement was a Manhattan area rancher and the 1924 Republican candidate for U.S. Congress from Kansas 5th District. In 1926 he was appointed by Secretary of Agriculture William M. Jardine to review appraisal of grazing value of National Forests. In 1935 he became president of Farmers' Independent Council of America.*

Drought

Below, the cracked, brown earth,
Like ancient earthen-ware,
Spreads out its dusty, worn
Old surface, baked and bare.

Above, the polished blue
Of a burnished August sky
Is an inverted bowl
Of every drop drained dry.

—May Frink Converse

Contemporary Kansas Poetry

Helen Rhoda Hoopes

page 31

(Kansas City: Joseph D. Havens
Company. 1927)

Joy in the Corn Belt

by C. L. Edson

The seed is in the clover,
The ear is in the shuck,
The melons shout, “Come Out, come out,
And eat this garden-truck.”
The yellow ears are for the steers,
The white are for the swine;
Their hair and hides and bacon sides
Are all for me and mine.
The cider mug is by its jug,
The sweet potatoes fry;
And ma is shovin’ in the oven
Pumpkin custard pie.

Sunflowers, A Book of Kansas Poems

Selected by Willard Wattles

(Chicago: A. C. McClurg. 1916)

A Kansas Sandstorm

(with apology to Mr. Wordsworth)

The sand is too much with us; morn and noon,
Hurling and swirling, it lays waste our powers;
Little we see of nature, for by hours
We are prisoners, held by this wild monsoon.
The trees are barren, stricken by the sand's buffoon:
The wind that is now howling at all hours
And is upgathering to strike anew.
With this, this sand, we are sadly out of tune.

It warps our souls;—Great Pan! I'd rather be
A reed in the river, uprooted, torn;
So might I, sitting on the bank with thee,
Hear music that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of a peaceful, quiet lea,
Where wind and sand move not and are foresworn.

—Margaret Evans.

Kansas Poets

Edited by May William Ward
(New York: Henry Harrison. 1935)

Page 78

The Growing Corn

Upon a thousand hills the corn
Stands tall and rank and glossy green;
Its broad leaves stir at early morn,
And dewy diamonds drop between.

A myriad banners wave o'erhead,
And countless silken pennons fly;
The tasseled plumes bend low, 't is said,
And only silken ears know why.

Those bending plumes- those upturned ears —
Methinks it is the old, old story!
Dame Nature still, with rapture hears
The song she heard in Eden's glory.

And so is wrought this miracle
Of life and growth unto perfection,—
A mystery that none may tell,
Save that God gives to it direction.

—Frederick J. Atwood

Kansas Rhymes and Other Lyrics
Frederick J. Atwood
(Topeka, Kan.: Crane & Company. 1902)
Page 12

The Promise of Bread

Out on the frozen uplands, underneath the snow
and sleet,
In the bosom of the plowland sleeps the Promise
of the Wheat.
With the ice for head-and-footstone, and a snowy
shroud outspread
In the frost-locked tomb of winter sleeps the Miracle
of Bread.
With its hundred thousand reapers and its hundred
thousand men,
And the click of guard and sickle and the flails that
turn again,
And drover's shout, and snap of whips and creak of
horses' tugs,
And a thin red line o' gingham girls that carry water
jugs;
And yellow stalks and dagger beards that stab thro'
cotton clothes,
And farmer boys a-shocking wheat in long and
crooked rows,
And dust-veiled men on mountain stacks, whose
pitchforks flash and gleam;
And threshing engines shrieking songs in syllables
of steam,
And elevators painted red that lift their giant arms
And beckon to the Harvest God above the brooding
farms,
And loaded trains that hasten forth, a hungry world
to fill—
All sleeping just beneath the snow, out yonder on the
hill.

—C. L. Edson

Sunflowers, A Book of Kansas Poems

Selected by Willard Wattles

pages 53-54

(Chicago: A. C. McClurg. 1916)

Butchering Day

High through the sky see the homing birds sailing —
It's butchering time
Frost on the fences, on picket and paling—
Hear the weird winter wind whining and wailing,
The warmth and the daylight are flitting and
failing —
It's hog-killing time.

The season of feasting has come with the fall,
And the digging of yams.
The corn-fattened oxen are sleek in the stall
And the hogs are all hams.
The hands of the harvest have come from their
toiling,
They've set the black pot full of water a-boiling,
There's a jangle of knives and the whetstone they're
oiling—
It's butchering time.

The women have laid down their sewin' and stitchin',
There's a stir in the place
And their laughter and chatter reflects from the kitchen—
The joy of the chase.
For old primal passions are stirring again,
And a wave of the cave-dweller days on their ken
Lures them keen on the blood-sprinkled trail of the men—
At butchering time.

The porker is squealing the pangs of his. fear,
For the chase has grown hot.
His cry is like music to every ear,
It's a flash of the cave man pursuing the deer,
It's the lusty and blood-shedding time of the year,
And the moment of rapture and capture is here—
There's the sound of a shot
The prey has gone down and the men with a shout
Plunge a knife in its heart and the life gurgles out,
In the old feeding lot.

And the women come out with a smile on each face
To their part in the task
As our foremothers followed the men to the chase
In an age that is hid in the hazes of space
And Time's motionless mask.
But we know that the past surges back in our veins
At the terrified cry,
And the fever of conquest lights up in our brains,
And the blood-lust in eye;
And the best day of all, in the lap of the fall
With its multifold charm,
In the thick of the fray upon butchering day—
On the farm.

—C. L. Edson

Sunflowers, A Book of Kansas Poems

Selected by Willard Wattles

pages 146-147

(Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1916)

The Water Tower

It's ugly—yes, I know—I hated it—
That huge red tank upon six spidery legs—
When it was being built. It has a hold
Far down into the rock. They blasted out
Great pits, and anchored those slim-looking legs
Deep . . . deep . . . They spoiled some trees that stood too near,
But things that rise so high must have deep holds . . .

Well, now it's up, and all the noise is past;
It throws a big round shadow in the sun . . .
I know it's ugly, yet somehow I like
To see it reaching up to touch the clouds,
Or tall and huge and dark beneath the moon.
—It makes me think of things . . . no matter what.

—Nora B. Cunningham

Contemporary Kansas Poetry

Helen Rhoda Hoopes

page 41

(Kansas City: Joseph D. Havens Company. 1927)

A Farmer's Son

The west wind blows through ripened wheat
Swishing, swishing, swishing.
I pad down the road with bare, brown feet
Wishing, wishing, wishing
That the golden heads were a vast gold fleet
Sailing, sailing, sailing
To the place where the earth and the sky-line meet
Paling, paling, paling.

'Tis harvest time and the white hot sun
Boiling, boiling, boiling
Scorches the faces of men sweat-run
Toiling, toiling, toiling.
In my jug is cool drink; for their work must be done
Teeming, teeming, teeming,
There's no time to be spent by a farmer's son
Dreaming, dreaming, dreaming.

—Isobel Doerr

Contemporary Kansas Poetry

Helen Rhoda Hoopes

page 49

(Kansas City: Joseph D. Havens Company. 1927)

The Cow-Boy

Ho, for the cow-boy,
 Brimming o'er with glee,
As merry as the larks
 With their glad tut-i-lee;
Upon his little pony,
 Swift as any deer;
Everything within is peace,
 He has no cause of fear.

Ho, for the cow-boy,
 Gliding to and fro,
Skimming o'er the prairie
 Swifter than the crow.,
After the rabbit,
 After the quail;
Running, chasing, driving,
 Through sunshine, rain or hail.

Ho, for the cow-boy,
 Sailing through the air,
Keeping watch o'er all
 Entrusted to his care.
No millionaire so light,
 No musician half so gay;
For he, when in the saddle,
 Can ride all care away.

Ho, for the cow-boy,
 When for home he goes;
His cot's of freshest hay,
 Yet slumbers sound, he knows.
What a life of healthy pleasure,
 Of enjoyment full and free; So
I, a cow-boy henceforth,
 Would fain forever be.

—James Wilkinson

Hours in Dreamland

James Wilkinson

(Buffalo: The Peter Paul Book Company. 1896)

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