

John Steuart Curry

The Way of the Modern Adventurers



MARIANNA KISTLER
BEACH
MUSEUM OF ART

John Steuart Curry had returned from a trip to Europe with wife Clara when he was asked to paint two murals – a map of North America and map of Europe and North Africa – for the New York travel agency of James Boring. This was Curry's first mural commission.

Boring was also a native of Kansas, born in Spring Hill, and by all accounts a colorful character. He was a graduate of the University of Kansas who had worked as a reporter for the *Kansas City Star* – training a young Ernest Hemingway – before becoming a captain in the Army during World War I. Sometime in the 1920s, Boring opened his travel agency on Fifth Avenue, advertising “healthful and delightful” ocean cruises.

Boring used Curry's 10-by-16-foot murals, *Wall Map of North America* (location unknown) and *Wall Map of Europe*, to mark the routes of his various cruises, pinning ribbons across oceans and borders. Vignettes of landmarks and figures in national dress suggested what clients might encounter during their travels. A banner in the upper center of the *Wall Map of Europe* indicated that cruises were on the White Star Line. In the upper right corner of the mural, Curry fashioned a logo for Boring's business – two sea horses holding a “B” with the image of a steamship on top.

A New World

Depicting a view of the globe was fitting for an artist who had just returned from eight months in Europe. In 1926, Curry decided that to advance his career he would need to follow the lead of other American



John Steuart Curry, *Wall Map of North America*, 1928, oil on canvas. Location unknown. Photographic reproduction, KSU Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art, bequest of Kathleen G. Curry, 2002.657

Cover: John Steuart Curry (1897-1946), *Wall Map of Europe*, 1928, oil on canvas, loan courtesy of Burr Living Trust, Lewisberry, Pennsylvania. Image courtesy John Hartmann Fine Art Conservation Services Inc., Carlisle, Pennsylvania

artists and travel to Paris. He and Clara settled on the Rue Daguerre in the neighborhood of Montparnasse, the center of intellectual and artistic life in the city. The stimulating sights and people Curry met carried over into his project for James Boring.

Curry enrolled at the school of Vasili Shukhaev and Alexander Yakovlev, Russian émigrés with ties to the *miriskusniki* (world of art), whose paintings incorporated styles from earlier periods in Western art, including folk art. The recommendation to attend the Shukhaev-Yakovlev school came from



James Boring tour advertisement. Source unknown

American artist James Daugherty, whom Curry assisted on another map mural for the Cooks Travel Agency booth at the 1926 Philadelphia Sesquicentennial Exposition. Daugherty may have been acquainted with Shukhaev and Yakovlev through 1920s exhibitions in Pittsburgh and New York that included their work.

Shukhaev's imagery emphasized the figure and favored Renaissance art. Curry's choice to attend the Shukhaev-Yakovlev school signaled a clear aim: to deepen his understanding of the Old Masters and to improve his figure drawing. According to friend and biographer Laurence Schmeckebier, Curry revealed little interest in avant-garde art during his time in Paris.

But there was a modern strain in his Russian teachers' art that seems to have intrigued the Kansas artist. He brought back photographic examples of their work, one showing painted decoration for an unidentified interior in the contemporary art deco style. A radiating sun and moon in Curry's *Wall Map of Europe* are evocative of the ceiling for the Russian project, with its swirling celestial elements.

Curry's decision to incorporate cultural figures in this map also suggests the influence of his contact with Yakovlev at the moment the Russian artist was garnering accolades for a series of paintings and drawings he had produced as part of the 1924-1925 *Croisiere Noire* (Black Cruise). Organized by Citroën, the expedition's half-track cars (cars with tank-like

continuous tracks instead of back wheels) became the first to successfully cross the continent of Africa. The world marveled at the artifacts, animal trophies, and film footage expedition members brought back. Curry's collection of photographs included numerous examples of Yakovlev's sympathetic renderings of diverse peoples he met on his Africa tour. The expedition-based origin of these images may have inspired the American artist to produce his sequential visual tour of the sites and peoples one might see during Boring's cruises to various regions, including North Africa.

The World in 1928

Many African nations would achieve independence after World War II, but at the time of the *Croisiere Noire*, most were still European colonies, reflecting the rearrangement of control that followed Germany's defeat during World War I. Curry's *Map of Europe* reflected these postwar alterations and other changes to national boundaries: Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia had replaced the Austro-Hungarian Empire; Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were formed from land relinquished by Russia. Poland, too, consisted of territory given up by Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Germany. The Ottoman Empire also was no longer, broken into the countries of today's Middle East.

It was a map of Europe and its surroundings remade by one brutal world war and heading toward another. Boring's travel agency would become a victim of events leading up to World War II. The Nazis seized his advance payments in Austria for transport and lodging for an Eastern European tour. The travel agent went bankrupt after he returned his customers' deposits.

Conservation of the Mural

After Boring's travel agency closed, the movements of Curry's murals become unclear. During the 1950s, a member of the Burr family, of Covington, Virginia, purchased *Wall Map of Europe* from a couple in Bath County. The painting was hanging in a barn. In 2012, the Burr Living Trust hired painting conservator John Hartmann, of Carlisle, Pennsylvania, to assess the work. Because of the poor conditions in which the painting had been stored – and its having been folded and rolled – it had suffered water damage and significant paint loss. A heavily yellowed varnish obscured its saturated colors.

Hartmann's team set about bringing the mural back to life. The painting's canvas was relaxed to diminish hundreds of folds and creases. Wallpaper paste clinging to its back was carefully scraped away so a linen lining could be added to strengthen the work. Hartmann and his team built a scroll-like mount to roll and unroll sections of the large and heavy canvas during treatment. Members of his team filled thousands of areas where pigment had been lost with gesso and then inpainted these areas using paint that could be removed by future conservators if necessary. Curry's bright color choices were carefully matched, and to respect the painting's original use, Hartmann and his teams left open the pin holes created by Boring's ribbons. Hartmann estimates that 700 hours went into conserving the mural.

Stepping Stone to Success

While working on his mural commission for Boring and in the months after its completion, Curry began a series of ambitious paintings depicting Kansas scenes. In 1928, his *Baptism in Kansas* was included in an exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. The painting earned accolades from critics and the attention of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, founder of the future Whitney Museum of Art in New York.

The Kansas artist soon became a national figure. In its December 24, 1934, issue, *Time* magazine produced a cover story recognizing a new regionally focused art by a small group of "earthy Midwesterners," citing Curry as one of its key proponents. This recognition led to numerous other mural commissions.



John Stewart Curry before *Wall Map of Europe*, 1928, John Stewart Curry and Curry Family Papers, 1848-1999, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

One of the first was for Seward Prosser, a prominent banker and art patron from Westport, Connecticut, who had loaned the money for the Currys' Paris stay. Prosser told Curry that the loan could be paid back in paintings after he returned. Curry produced a mural of a map of Cape Cod for the living room of Prosser's home in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, in 1929.

The rising star would produce murals for the

U.S. Justice Department and U.S. Interior Department buildings in Washington, D.C., in addition to murals for the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Curry was appointed an artist-in-residence at the university in 1936 and spent the remainder of his life in Wisconsin. Perhaps his best-known mural project was his cycle for the Kansas State Capitol in Topeka featuring the powerful figure of the abolitionist John Brown and a modern Kansas farm family.

These and other murals benefited from the artist's early experience balancing color and composition on a large scale for the adventurous Boring. The conservation of this remarkable painting provides new insight into the artist's activities in the months before he hit the national stage.

Elizabeth G. Seaton, Curator



Staff of John Hartmann Fine Art Conservation Services Inc., of Carlisle, Pennsylvania, treating *Wall Map of Europe* in 2013-14. Images courtesy John Hartmann Fine Art Conservation Services.

Sources

"Art—U.S. Scene," *Time* XXIV, no. 26, December 24, 1934.

Bown, Matthew Cullerne. *A Dictionary of Twentieth Century Russian and Soviet Painters, 1900-1980s*. London: Izomar Limited, 1998.

Cipriano, Ralph. "James Boring, 102, Colorful Figure Whose Career was Brushed by Fame." *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 14, 1990.

Helms, Patrick Noah. "Curry's Map of a Changing Europe." Unpublished paper, April 17, 2016.

Iacovleff, Alexandre. *Dessins et peintures d'Afrique exécutés au cours de l'Expédition Citroën Centre Afrique, deuxième mission Haardt, Audouin-Dubreuil*. Paris: Jules Meyniel, 1927.

John Steuart Curry and Curry Family Papers, 1848-1999, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, series 8, box 6, folder 49.

"John Steuart Curry: The Way of the Modern Adventure." Treatment report, Hartmann Fine Art Conservation Services, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, March 18, 2015.

Junker, Patricia, et al. *John Steuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West*. New York: Hudson Hills Press in association with the Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1998.

Milner, John. *A Dictionary of Russian and Soviet Artists, 1420-1970*. Woodbridge, England: Antique Collectors' Club, 1993.

Schmeckebier, Laurence. *John Steuart Curry's Pageant of America*. New York: American Artists Group, 1943.

"Shukhaev Vasily Ivanovich," Elysium Gallery, Moscow, <http://www.elysium.ru/en/painters/275.html> (accessed December 16, 2016).

Produced in association with the exhibition, "John Steuart Curry: Mapping the Early Career," January 17– May 13, 2017, organized by the Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art, Kansas State University.

Graphic Design: Michael Oetken
Printing: Kansas State University Printing

Major support for the exhibition is provided by Joann Goldstein in memory of Jack Goldstein. Additional support comes from the R.M. Seaton Endowment for Exhibitions and The Ross and Marianna Kistler Beach Endowment for the Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art.

© 2017 by Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art, Kansas State University, Manhattan. All rights reserved.

MARIANNA KISTLER
BEACH
MUSEUM OF ART

FREE admission and parking – 14th & Anderson
785.532.7718 | beach.k-state.edu
Tues., Wed., Fri. 10-5 | Thurs. 10-8 | Sat. 11-4

[f](https://www.facebook.com/BeachMuseumofArt) /BeachMuseumofArt | [@beachmuseum](https://www.instagram.com/beachmuseum) | [yt](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC...) /beachmuseum

KANSAS STATE
UNIVERSITY