

Source: Linda Duke, 785-532-7718, lduke@k-state.edu

Website: <http://beach.k-state.edu/>

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Photo cutline:

Written by: Beth Bohn, 785-532-1544, bbohn@k-state.edu

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A fitting home: Beach Museum of Art acquires John Steuart Curry's 'Kansas Pasture'

MANHATTAN -- Kansas State University's Mariana Kistler Beach Museum of Art is expanding its collection of works by one of America's best-known regionalist painters, John Steuart Curry.

Already home to approximately 900 works by the native Kansas artist, the Beach Museum has added Curry's "Kansas Pasture" to its collection. The painting will be installed Aug. 13. The acquisition was made possible by the Max Miller Art Acquisition & Conservation Fund; Joann Goldstein in memory of her husband, Jack Goldstein, and her friend, Eleanor "Elle" Griffith Stolzer; Dan and Beth Bird; Russell Clay Harvey and Patricia McGivern; and Friends of the Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art.

"We are thrilled to be able to add to the museum's collection such a fine painting by a Kansas artist who deeply loved his home state," said Linda Duke, Beach Museum director. "'Kansas Pasture' is a visual celebration of the beauty of rural Kansas."

Curry, born in 1897, grew up on a farm in Jefferson County, Kan., and continued to love and depict Kansas scenes even after he moved out of state. Among his best-known works are the murals he created in 1937 at the Kansas State Capitol in Topeka. The artist died in 1946.

"Kansas Pasture," an oil on canvas, is believed to depict a scene in the Gypsum Hills -- probably in Barber County -- where the artist visited relatives on the Heart family ranch during the 1930s. It shows a Hereford bull rubbing its neck against a small tree in the center of a small meadow where three cows and two calves are resting. A narrow stream runs through the grassy area, which is surrounded in the back and on the sides by leafy trees. The earth is red where it is exposed, and across the distant plain, mesa-like formations appear. Over all is a blue sky with a few fluffy white clouds. The 36-by-40-inch painting, completed around 1936, is thought to be in its original 46-by-50-inch silver gilt frame and was signed in the lower left corner by the artist.

"Kansas Pasture" was offered for purchase to the museum by Jim Osborn, of Paradise Valley, Ariz., and Kansas City, Mo. Osborn bought the painting in 1997 from a dealer who was handling sales for Kathleen Curry, the artist's widow. Most of the Beach Museum's collection of Curry work came as a bequest from his wife. The museum's collection, which includes many drawings and prints, is one of the largest -- if not the largest -- museum collections of the artist's works.

The painting's Kansas themes struck a chord with the donors who helped purchase it.

"The Herefords were king back then," said donor Dan Bird. "You didn't hear much about the Angus. Back then they weren't good in hot weather. Today, two-thirds of the cattle in Kansas are black Angus."

Bird also noticed the painting depicts a spring or early summer setting because of the grass and the leaves on the trees. He said that herders at one time allowed the bulls to be with the cows year-round, but today they limit the interaction to control when calves are born.

Paintings by Curry rarely become available for purchase, so Bird was pleased to help secure it for the Beach Museum.

"Curry was one of the great artists and one of the greater people," Bird said. "You don't run into that combination very often and you don't want to pass on his work. The museum is a good place to have the painting."

For Joann Goldstein, the purchase of "Kansas Pasture" was a fitting way to honor some special people in her life.

"I'm a Kansas girl at heart and when I saw the Curry painting, it reminded me that the Stolzer family was so generous to the museum," Goldstein said. "I really felt it would be an honor to give it in memory of Eleanor "Elle" Griffith Stolzer and in honor of my dear husband, Jack Goldstein. Jack was instrumental in helping establish the museum and it is something he would have said yes to."

Before purchasing the painting, Beach Museum of Art staff had it examined by Mary Schafer, a conservator at the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Mo., who found it to be in very good shape. Don Lambert, a Kansas City-based independent curator and longtime Curry family friend, joined this examination and brought research information about Curry. The museum's collections committee approved the painting's purchase in July.

It's the third Curry oil painting owned by the Beach Museum that depicts Barber County scenes. "Sun Dogs" was painted in 1930 and purchased by the Friends of Art at Kansas State University in 1935, and "Sunrise Over Kansas," painted in 1935, was purchased by the museum in 1996.

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