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John Steuart Curry and
Grant Wood with their
class of art students
at Stone City, Iowa.

John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood were among the first distinguished painters of the twentieth century who conveyed a strong impression of the America west of the Hudson River. Familiar figures during the 1930s in both American art and society, Curry and Wood created images that possessed timeless appeal to our sense of nationalism as well as more universal sentiments. As a result, these American Scene artists are once again receiving widespread public attention.

Accepting the thematic complexity of their work, we realize that Curry and Wood provide a vital link between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially in terms of their role in the evolution of a unique American iconography. Quite recently, this subject was examined in an exhibition, *The Natural Paradise*, at the Museum of Modern Art. Included in the exhibition's catalogue was an essay by Robert Rosenblum, where he concluded, "it would seem that for American art, elemental nature is still a source of myth and energy."¹

To many artists of this century, including Curry and Wood, the prevailing mood of the 1920s and 1930s prompted a retreat to certain values that had prospered between the 1820s and the 1850s.² Thus we encounter a thematic interest in both primeval or elemental nature and personal isolation or anonymity. As a consequence, we can find in the work of the American Scene painters—as well as in that of artists such as Marin, Dove, Wyeth, Tobey, and Hartley—a unique recurrence of various elements that had inspired the landscapists of the nineteenth century.³

As a movement, the American Scene is not easily defined. This is surprising, since the term infers a unified point of view. Technically, we are obliged to accept John I. H. Baur's conclusion that the term encompasses all the works of art that reflect this native environment.⁴ And yet, in 1933, the American Scene was adopted as the theme of the government recuperative programs initiated in the wake of the Great Depression.⁵ Although conceived to provide individuals with work, the program by 1935 also reflected a widespread belief in the crucial role that the arts could assume in contemporary society. As such, it answered the desire for a nationalistic art that could combat the deep psychological and sociological impact of the depression.

Since the government-initiated programs existed between 1933 and 1941–1942, these years have served to designate both the predominant style and the active years of the American Scene movement. However, this neat categorization must be qualified. Although temporarily overshadowed, the innovative experiments of the modernists maintained a vitality in the work of such artists as Sheeler, Walkowitz, Dove, and Stella. In retrospect, it was also during the early 1930s that the American Scene movement was popularized and the second wave of modernizing was formulated.⁶ Therefore, it is interesting to note that in 1935 not only was the Federal Art Project of the Works Projects Administration officially established, but also the Whitney Museum held a major exhibit of abstract painting in America. And, in the next year, the major exhibitions organized by Alfred Barr at the Museum of Modern Art dealt with such movements as cubism, fantastic art, and surrealism.

In this century, the American Scene movement has represented the apogee of

1. Kynaston McShine et al., *The Natural Paradise: Painting in America, 1800–1950*, p. 37.

2. John Wilmerding, *American Art*, p. 182.

3. McShine et al., *Natural Paradise*, pp. 108–27.

4. John I. H. Baur, ed., *New Art in America*, p. 22.

5. Matthew Baigell, *The American Scene: American Painting of the 1930s*, pp. 46–54. Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) established December 1933 and terminated June 1934, succeeded by the Section, which lasted until 1943. Federal Art Project of WPA established May 1935 and lasted until 1943.

6. Lloyd Goodrich and John I. H. Baur, *American Art of Our Century*, p. 49.

7. At the same time, it can be said that it emerged in the wake of the major societal transformation, lasting four decades, that began at the close of Reconstruction and ended with the conclusion of the First World War.

8. William Innes Homer, *Robert Henri and His Circle*, p. 141.

9. In his 1941 *The Hero in America*, Dixon Wecter stated, "Homage to heroes is a vital part of our patriotism. Patriotism springs traditionally from love of place; it is a filial relation toward mother country or fatherland. The earth upon which our feet are planted, from which we draw our livelihood, becomes an over-soul, the greatest hero of our national loyalties."

10. Concurrently, farm prices continued to decline until 1932 when the price of a bushel of wheat was forty-two cents, the lowest the price had been in quite some time. For further information see Dixon Wecter, *The Age of the Great Depression, 1929-1941*, first published in 1948.

11. In addition to the actual objects, it is interesting to note that when Grant Wood lectured at the American Federation of Art's Fourth Annual Regional Conference in March 1931, his topic was a new movement, regionalism.

12. Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920*, p. 295.

13. Oscar Handlin, *Truth in History*, pp. 53-59.

the long tradition of realism, carrying to fruition the earlier experiments in subject matter initiated by *The Eight*.⁷ In as much, the influential teachings of Robert Henri were a crucial factor. Although echoing the sentiments of Eakins, Henri established the spirit of the American Scene movement when in 1908 he stated: "It seems that the basis of future American art lies in our artists' appreciation of the value of the human quality all about them, which is nothing more or less than seeing the truth, and then expressing it according to their individual understanding of it."⁸ Thus, artists turned to their environment for inspiration and, in so doing, they lent a fresh point of view to an otherwise staid tradition.⁹

As demonstrated by the works themselves, the American Scene movement was characterized by a rich diversity of aesthetic preferences, such as those proposed by Edward Hopper and Ben Shahn. Rightly so, contemporary critics differentiated two independent and often-times rivaling tendencies within this movement. These tendencies were regionalism, a concern for the native environment, and social realism, or the expression of a broad social humanitarianism.

Because of the widespread human suffering during the early 1930s, many of the impersonal qualities that had characterized the industrial age were generally rejected. Because of the crash of 1929 and the problems during the ensuing years, people became more apt to turn to a consideration of humanity as a social phenomenon. Between 1930 and 1932, unemployment had risen from four to fourteen million, and as such it would have been difficult to react with indifference to the urban realities mirrored in the bread lines of Reginald Marsh.¹⁰ Therefore, it is not surprising to find that when Franklin Delano Roosevelt initiated his New Deal-Federal Arts Project in 1935, the social realists dominated the American Scene movement.

In part, this conclusion is confirmed by Thomas Hart Benton's decision to leave New York in 1935 and return to Missouri, and in the next year, Curry's departure for Wisconsin. These facts substantiate Benton's claim that by this time, regionalism was an anachronism, invented and popularized by the mass media. Indeed, when further pursued, a discrepancy does exist between the actual emergence of its characteristic imagery in works of art and the time of its public acknowledgment. At least in the case of Curry and Wood, such works were being done by 1917. For that reason, it seems plausible to conclude that in contrast to the social realist aspect of American Scenism that prospered during the mid to late 1930s, regionalism was largely a phenomenon of the 1920s and early 1930s.¹¹ In itself, the opening of the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1931 was a response to an already active tradition in society. Therefore, a situation existed wherein the American Scene movement was affected in two steps, one of which occurred during the next decade. The characteristics of each interacted, but their strength was indicative of shifting priorities within their time frame. With this in mind, let us turn to a discussion of the 1920s.

The period of the 1920s was one of profound transition and crisis in this country.¹² In retrospect, historians view it with a curious mixture of nostalgia and repudiation. Although the complexity of these years discourages generalizations, the prevailing mood was decidedly one of mission.¹³ This concept prompted a

widespread interest in the nature of our society and its adaptability to the changing times. Precipitated by the disillusionment of the First World War and its shattering of Wilsonian idealism, a revival of Americanism swept the country.¹⁴ Americans looked to the past with an earnest hope of understanding and rationalizing the present. At this same time, quest for security in a rapidly changing society sought to stress qualities of continuity and vitality.

This societal search for values deemed lost was nurtured by an active literature. The works of Mark Twain and Walt Whitman assumed a new popularity, and in addition to the regionalist writers at Vanderbilt University, the frontier and sectionalist theories of Frederick Jackson Turner captivated the public imagination. A similar situation existed with the equally influential *Rise of American Civilization*, by Charles A. Beard, who together with James Harvey Robinson advocated a new history that would serve reform objectives. Animated by a creed of progress, Beard and other leading historians dealt with the concept of America as a unique culture.¹⁵ In the mid-1920s not only did articles appear interpreting our art in geographical terms, but also the already widely read Thomas Craven established the framework for a native art that was realistic in style and traditional in subject matter. Clearly, these and other efforts sought to bolster morale by emphasizing what was good about American culture and society; ultimately seeking to convey in readily understandable terms the image of a healthy America.

The importance of the native environment was not new to American cultural thought. Popularized by the eighteenth-century English writings of Edmund Burke (1729–1797) and Archibald Alison (1757–1839), this theory in the psychology of artistic experience dealt with the intricate relationship between objects in the material world and their effect on our emotions and inner consciousness.¹⁶ This theory elucidates an important aspect of this country's view of nature; the individual's character is closely identified with the environment.

This concept provided justification for the existence of the Hudson River School and much of nineteenth-century American painting. Simply stated, nature was considered a source of virtue, a place to contemplate the sublime, an avenue for spiritual sustenance and, ultimately, a symbol of national vitality. Throughout this century, the message was clear: the destiny or progress of the American people and their culture was inextricably associated with the environment. The far-reaching implications of this concept are clearly evident in the inspirational image of the pioneer heading west, the striking narrative of primordial nature, and the intense feelings of nationalism that accompanied these visual metaphors.

Therefore, those nineteenth-century images conveyed a sense of national continuity, and in so doing, unified this nation at a time of stress. Similarly, the writings of the 1920s reflect the belief that art and culture function best when they reflect our native heritage and emphasize the traditional values that exemplified past achievements.

Thus, at the outset, a consideration that is crucial to our understanding of the American Scene movement is an awareness that it encompassed complex psychological and spiritual values that existed in our past and were relevant to con-

14. Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, pp. 284–86.

15. Handlin, *Truth in History*, p. 90.

16. The American landscape tradition was strongly influenced by this eighteenth-century English concept. The most popular works on this subject were Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) and Archibald Alison, *Essays on the Nature and Principle of Taste* (1790).

temporary concerns. Of particular interest is the persistence of universal themes that address the human condition and its relationship to nature. Through these associations, the uniqueness of American culture as a social and environmental phenomenon was reaffirmed.

The characteristics of Curry's and Wood's work have been delineated in numerous books, exhibitions, and critical reviews. However, with rare exceptions, the need for stylistic categorization has prevailed in their continued identification with the regionalist movement. Of greater consequence should be their affinity for a state of mind that transcended the merely stylistic and valued thematic associations and their continuity in American art. In retrospect, a discussion of their preference should broaden our appreciation of these artists and of this pivotal phase of American aesthetic and cultural history.

Traditionally, John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood are considered part of a group of artists that included Thomas Hart Benton and, at times, Charles Burchfield. This association with regionalism was voiced publicly in the December 24, 1934, issue of *Time* and has continued unabated. In all fairness, the term is in many respects appropriate; however, it is ironic that when the article appeared, these three artists had only recently met. Their regionalist works were being done through the 1920s, and by 1934 they all had firmly established reputations with the eastern press. These circumstances support Benton's conclusion that regionalism was merely a popular anachronism, invented as a term and movement primarily by the mass media and unsubstantiated on an art historical basis. Despite these qualifications, it must be admitted that Curry was very aware of this regionalist philosophy and, being very practical, considered its potential for financial success.¹⁷

Curry and Wood prospered during a period when artists manifested a common predisposition for narrative compositions. Also, artists tended to have three principal concerns: an awareness of the existing social environment, the function of art in society, and the question of how to be a major American artist.¹⁸ It was not sufficient to be merely an artist in America; that role was precluded by the general loss of confidence in the power of the community, the renewed sense of mission, and the intensifying nationalism within the United States.

One of the most vigorous spokesmen for the growing feeling of nationalism was Thomas Hart Benton. Although Benton is excluded from the accompanying exhibit and illustrations, I would be remiss to ignore his art at this point of our discussion, especially since it adds relevance to the association of Curry and Wood. Benton was articulate, argumentative, and persistent in his intents. Prolific as both an artist and writer, Benton in large measure formulated public opinion about the American Scene movement. This was due to both his public prominence and his longevity. In this regard, it is important to understand that Benton's frame of reference was national rather than regional. It is also important to remember that Benton lived thirty years longer than either Curry or Wood, a factor that was crucial to his perspective. And he harbored a strong ideological commitment to the development of an indigenous American art that broke with its colonial and European aestheticism.

A key factor to Benton's attitude was his family, well known for its government

17. Thomas Hart Benton, "American Regionalism, a Personal History of the Movement," pp. 43-44.

18. Brian O'Doherty, *American Makers: The Voice and the Myth*, p. 42.

service and its crucial role in the settlement of the frontier. As such, Benton possessed a keen awareness of history and of the role played by his family in that history. Increasingly, Benton became enthralled by this country, its dreams, energies, aspirations, and at the same time, the people who labored to make it a great nation so quickly. This acknowledgment of the dignity and the value of the workers to the community is crucial to his art and can readily be found in Curry and Wood.¹⁹

Benton firmly shared his contemporaries' belief that good art could be created from scenes that the average American could readily understand because of direct experience. Accordingly, he explored the commonplace and, with it, the everyday processes active in an evolving society.²⁰ Returning to Missouri in 1935 he maintained his home there for the duration of his life, recognizing the vulnerability of American Scene painting and acknowledging the loss of a sense of movement. In spite of this, he continued to look at life as a historian, actively seeking to chronicle the human qualities of a particular time. But as a historian, it is sadly evident that Benton most cherished turn-of-the-century America.²¹

Soon after returning from his fourth trip abroad, Grant Wood exhibited his *American Gothic* at the Art Institute of Chicago.²² The painting was an instant success because it expressed what people were thinking at the time. To this day, much of its importance rests upon the classic subject matter found in this painting rather than its technical distinction. Like the other American Scenists, Wood sought a contemporary expression of American cultural thought and succeeded in pursuing this theme with sensitivity and originality.

A brief survey of Wood's work reveals a singular interest in the rural environment. In this respect, he echoes the conflicting attitudes characterized by Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* (1920), and Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (1938). In *Spoon River Anthology* we encounter an exploitation of the darker side of the rural environment. To be sure, the pastoral qualities of the small town are conveyed and appreciated, but so are its socially and intellectually limiting aspects. It was here that Wood's bitter satire was most eloquently treated. In paintings such as *Daughters of the Revolution* and *Victorian Survival*, Wood succeeds in conveying a clever duplicity. At one and the same time, we are given not only a seemingly natural image of a protagonist but also an amusing caricature of their affected sincerity. In a sense, Wood sought to mock those who considered themselves this country's spiritual backbone—the keepers of its traditions.²³

Curiously, this satirizing interpretation of the Midwest disappeared within a two-year period. As characterized by Thornton Wilder's play, an active nostalgia and respect for the rural community became dominant in much of Wood's subsequent work. In a very real sense, Wood sought to preserve, at least in his painting, a rural way of life that had given his existence meaning. While implying certain limitations, almost all of his works praised the hard-working farmer as a positive element in our society. The image created is optimistic, clearly seeking to emphasize what is good about this country, and thereby providing a hopeful symbol of the nation's future and a more confident cultural self-image.

Unlike Benton, Wood did not seek to create an American style nor did he seek

19. Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, p. 112.

20. Thomas Hart Benton, "An Artist's Selection, 1908–1974," p. 4.

21. See Baigell, *The American Scene*, for a further discussion of Thomas Hart Benton.

22. For an extensive discussion on Wood, the standard monograph is James M. Dennis, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture*.

23. Baigell, *The American Scene*, p. 111.

24. Ibid.

25. Dennis, *Grant Wood*, p. 246.

26. Quoted in Baigell, *The American Scene*, p. 111.

27. See *Art Digest* 17 (15 November 1942): 23 and 17 (1 December 1942): 4.

28. For an extensive discussion on Curry, the standard monograph is Laurence E. Schmeckebier, *John Stuart Curry's Pageant of America*. Also see the special issue of the *Kansas Quarterly* 2:4 (Fall 1970) on John Stuart Curry, edited by Bret Waller.

29. Schmeckebier, *Curry's Pageant*, p. 78.

to impose his own distinctive technique on others. Rather, he sought to establish a sense of regional art centers such as the Stone City Colony, where artists could experience free from established standards and ultimately arrive at a personal vision that expressed a particular region.²⁴ At the same time, Wood and Curry were very conscious that they were the first distinguished artists since George Caleb Bingham to depict the neglected essence of the American Midwest as a meaningful subject in itself. Unfortunately, the Stone City Colony lasted only during the summers of 1932 and 1933, and Wood's subsequent tenure at the University of Iowa (1934–1941) did not meet his creative expectations.²⁵

Throughout his life, Wood remained strongly captivated by the primal character of the landscape. On one occasion he stated, "The naked earth in its massive contours, asserts itself through anything that is laid upon it."²⁶ A crucial factor was the stylistic approach learned both from his deep appreciation for American folk designs and during his stay in Munich. Influenced by fifteenth- and sixteenth-century German painting, Wood adopted a similar linear precision and a careful repetition of geometric forms, arriving at a sophisticated technique of interpretive design. Wood's landscape views are disturbingly well organized; his technical design emphasizes the order and harmony of the rural community. Pleased with the result, Wood continued in this direction until his death in 1942. Although technically distinguished and clever, his works conveyed an idealized impression of a society at a time when the public increasingly preferred a direct image. Thus, his position was extremely vulnerable within the realistically oriented American Scene. This fact, as well as the backlash from Benton's abrasive attacks against the art establishment, likely resulted in the indifferent public response accorded to a retrospective of his work at the Chicago Art Institute in 1942.²⁷

As Wood, Curry was a familiar figure in American society during the 1930s.²⁸ Of the "regionalists," Curry is probably the least problematical, and when at his best, among the most distinguished. An excellent draughtsman, he studied in Europe for less than a year, returning to New York in the late 1920s. Once there, he quickly responded to the prevailing artistic preferences and completed his classic *Baptism in Kansas* (1928) (Figure 2). Simply, Curry believed that a sincere and lasting value was to be found in the experienced realities of the basic farm existence—the religion, the physical activities, the natural sensations, and the other integral aspects of the rural community.²⁹ To Curry, this imagery was an immediate way to maintain traditional ties to the past. Curiously, the Midwest was his inspiration and yet, between 1919 and 1936 he lived for the most part in New York. However, he was able to convey a sense of immediacy not readily found in the stylized designs of Wood.

Curry's works were not ones of direct observation; rather he sought the synthesis of the objective and the subjective, although his *Baptism in Kansas* depicts an actual occurrence, it is doubtful that such a dramatic compositional arrangement was provided by the observed event. Nevertheless, this is a significant work for several reasons; it directed public attention to the American Scene movement, it was done before Curry returned to the Midwest after his Paris stay, and it points out the extent to which his subject matter was selected for its design po-

tential. The year after he completed *Baptism in Kansas*, Curry completed his painting masterpiece, *The Tornado* (Figure 5). This work possesses the qualities that characterize much of Curry's art—dramatic action, lively personalities, activated space, sculptural articulation, and vibrant color. In addition to pointing out Curry's stylistic characteristics, this work established a theme that was maintained throughout his work, the historical struggle of man with nature. It is important to realize that Curry's theme was not restricted to the violent imagery in this painting or to his impressive *The Line Storm* (Figure 33). A critic described this work as follows: "In it the spirit of the artist and perhaps his generation stands disclosed, a powerful spirit born of America, inspired by America, and dedicated to American ideas and ideals, to my mind, the canvas is a historical work of art, historical in that it mirrors our contemporary will to believe in ourselves, to believe in our own resources and in our native beauty."³⁰ On another occasion, Curry described his imagery as follows: "Back of the historical allegory is the great backdrop of the phenomenon of nature, and to those who live and depend on the soil for life and sustenance, this phenomenon is God."³¹ This statement reaffirms an important aspect of this country's view of nature; the individual's character is closely identified with the environment. Such works as *Our Good Earth* (Figure 86) and *The Valley of the Wisconsin* (Figure 95) clearly convey an image of America as a fertile land inhabited by heroic people.

During the late 1930s, Curry increasingly turned to mural work. Valuing the opportunity for social comment, especially since the subjects would be available to large segments of the public, he daringly confronted the question of equal rights in several works, which in themselves indicate his desire to expand the sphere of his effectiveness beyond a narrow regionalism. But, in spite of his aims, Curry was not able, as Benton, to convincingly interpret the past in allegorical terms. Even works such as his exquisite *John Brown* (1939) (Figure 7) remain mannered, its success due primarily to its dynamic expressiveness. In many ways, Curry was blinded by his desire to see an American renaissance in the fine arts.³² Unfortunately, he pursued this vision with a singular determination, while at the same time, he remained largely ambivalent to the changing times. In the final analysis, Curry was at his best in works such as *Wisconsin Landscape* (1938–1939) (Figure 8), where he was able to effectively join a meaningful subject matter with a sensitive awareness of an experienced reality.³³

Essentially, John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood were modern American painters who, like their nineteenth-century predecessors, attempted to approach a timeless American landscape in a spirit that was both new and universal. Each created a striking definition of the rural community, the sublimity of its landscape, and its relationship to their own character. To each artist, our native environment provided a vehicle to promote traditional values that prospered in the past and were relevant to the present. They transcended the limitations of European aesthetics, seeking a visual definition of America unparalleled in our history, and in so doing, inaugurated a new phase of our continuing intimacy with our surroundings. As such, the works of Curry and Wood are remarkable examples of the persistence of earlier themes in our art, and they are individual expressions of the on-going quest for a valid American iconography and mythology.

30. *Art Digest* 9 (5 February 1935): 16.

31. Schmeckeber, *Curry's Pageant*, p. 321.

32. Baigell, *The American Scene*, p. 129.

33. For further information, see Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825–1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).



John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood at Stone City, Iowa.