

Midwest Realities: Regional Painting 1920-1950

April 13-June 17, 1995



Share the Arts

Presented by the Ohio Arts Council in the Riffe Gallery
Organized by Southern Ohio Museum, Portsmouth

Images presented in "Midwest-Realities: Regional Painting 1920-1950" at the Riffe Gallery are products of the culture, politics and economics of the 1920s, '30s and '40s. The Midwestern culture that provided the backdrop for the production of these paintings played a crucial part in shaping the style and content of the work. Given the current interest in redefining and reassessing American art and history, it is no surprise that art produced by the Depression-era painters of the Midwest is being viewed with increased interest today.

Midwestern art in the 1920s and '30s was influenced by continuing industrialization, a political and economic climate that resulted in the Great Depression, and the effects of modernization on artists. As the Midwest moved from being a primarily agricultural society during the 19th century to being increasingly industrial in the early 20th century, attitudes toward the landscape changed.

The imposition of machines on the landscape created rapid change and growth that excited many people and frightened others. In this exhibition several works speak to the urban-rural, agrarian-industrial duality of the region, including George Jo Mess's "A Century of Progress," painted around 1929, and William Sommer's "Brandywine Landscape," done around 1936. In each of those works the dualism of Midwestern life is represented by technology imposing itself on a rural landscape.

In the 1920s, self-interest increased among Americans as they became aware of their superior economic and political might following World War I. As Americans turned their attention and resources to development within their own borders, involvement with and acceptance of European culture and politics declined. Political and cultural isolationism was on the rise. This self-absorption inspired Midwestern artists to approach the Great Lakes landscape with a new fervor.

Since the turn of the century, Midwestern artists had been painting the landscape as part of a decades-old tradition of realism and impressionism. During the 1920s and '30s depiction of Great Lakes landscapes became filled with the subtle poetry and layered meanings of artists rediscovering America in the context of a modern world. During the Depression of the 1930s this pre-occupation with American people and places increased even more.

Supported by a public filled with nationalistic zeal and native pride, and upheld by influential art critics of the day, Midwestern regional painters set about redefining and reinventing an American art that was self-generating and self-supporting. That newfound interest in and appreciation for American landscapes influenced artists in this exhibition. Frank Wilcox's Cleveland backyards and Cecil Head's Indianapolis houses were born of urges to find beauty, poetry and meaning in domestic life.

The strongest factor influencing style and content in Midwest regional painting was modernism. As a form and as an idea modernism began to creep into the vocabulary of Midwest painters during the 1920s and 1930s. An increased use of decorative patterning, architectonic structure and arbitrary color became more prevalent.

For artists whose training and temperament were rooted in the traditional realist doctrines of American painting, modernism became something to rebel against. The acceptance of change, experimentation and avant-gardism that modernism seemed to embrace threatened pragmatic and conservative artists who found their worth as purveyors of a centuries-old and staunchly realistic Western art tradition.



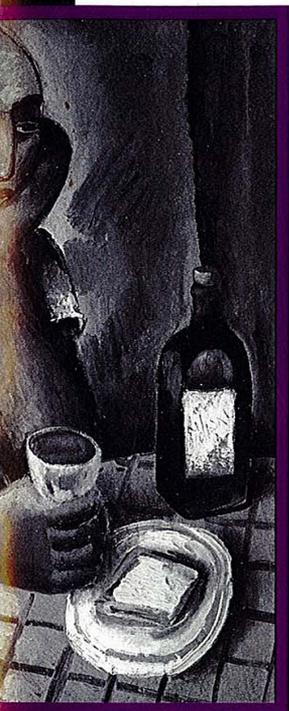
Modernism gave many artists permission to invent visual language what would help in their search for new expressions appropriate for the modern age. To varying degrees the paintings in this exhibition attest to the individual uses and acceptance of modernist modes of expression.

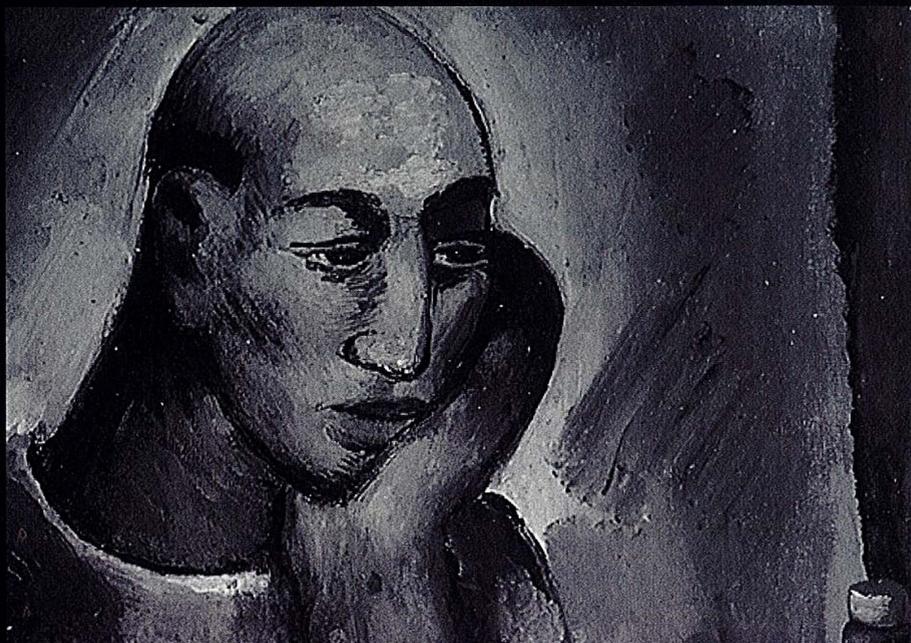
The dichotomy between “modernist” and “anti-modernist” approaches creates a tension in the work, reflecting the artists broader ambivalence toward American life. Jack Steele’s “View of Ann Arbor,” for example, presents a realist view of a small Midwestern town but modernizes the picture in style and content by using the geometry of local industry and an El Greco-like light to suggest a changing atmosphere and a changing time.

The artists in this exhibition are receiving critical attention because America has once more entered a period of re-examination, and the dualities of existence occupy our thoughts. Nationalism absorbs the country as it did during the 1930s and ‘40s. We debate the urban versus rural dilemma but call it urban versus suburban. Growing technology ushering in the information age excites and frightens us just as the machines of the industrial era affected people then.

Because Americans are searching for ways to comprehend the complexities and dualities of their lives, it is useful to look back to understand how Americans in general and American artists in particular approached the same concerns and problems in the past.

*Adapted from an essay by David A. Lusenhop, Jr.,
curator of the exhibition.*





Midwest Realities:
Regional Painting
1920-1950



We're Building Ohio Through the Arts

The Ohio Arts Council, a state agency established in 1965, is committed to the economic, educational and cultural development of Ohio. The Council believes the arts should be shared by the people of Ohio. The arts arise from public, individual and organizational efforts. The OAC supports and encourages those efforts.

The Ohio Arts Council is an equal opportunity employer.

Ohio Arts Council

727 East Main Street
Columbus, OH 43205-1796
614/466-2613 or -4541 TDD

George V. Voinovich, Governor
Barbara S. Robinson, OAC Board Chairperson
Wayne P. Lawson, Executive Director

The Riffe Gallery, operated by the Ohio Arts Council, showcases the work of Ohio's artists and the collections of the state's museums and galleries.

Riffe Gallery

Vern Riffe Center for
Government and the Arts
77 South High Street
Columbus, Ohio
614/644-9624

Gallery Hours

M, Tu, W 11-4
Th, F 11-7:30
Sat, Sun 12-4
Free Admission



Share the Arts