

Agricultural Lag: The Iowa State Fair Art Salon, 1854-1941

Chris Rasmussen

Writing in the *American Mercury* in 1926, Iowa author Ruth Suckow diagnosed a collective psychological malady afflicting her native state. Iowa had acquired “a timid, fidgety, hesitant state of mind” with regard to cultural and intellectual matters, the result of decades of dependence upon New England for guidance in religion, learning, and the arts.¹ It was not that Iowans, many of whom could proudly trace their ancestry back to New England, were content simply to transplant their Anglo-American cultural heritage in the midwest; rather, they fundamentally lacked the confidence necessary to create their own, indigenous culture in their new environment. This unfortunate state of affairs had deep historical roots, according to Suckow, for the original settlers had come to Iowa “with the belief that they were leaving culture behind.” They had come neither on a religious errand nor a civilizing mission, but to acquire land, farm, and make money doing it.

Many of them did make money, and these more prosperous Iowans began to covet the amenities and trappings of refinement. Unfortunately, according to Suckow, New England remained “the only conceivable mold.” The experience of settling and living in the midwest, too many Iowans assumed, could be of no lasting aesthetic value: “Culture, art, beauty were fixed in certain places.”² Judged by the standards of Boston, the Midwest could never appear anything but hopelessly backward.

Nonetheless, Suckow detected some signs that by the 1920s Iowans were at last beginning to overcome their sense of cultural inferiority toward the East, and that “a native culture has begun to work itself out.” The sheer expanse of the West,

and its settlement by diverse ethnic groups, she observed, had diffused and diminished New England's cultural hegemony, precipitating a "general break-up of culture," amid which it was at last possible for Iowans to discuss and participate in the arts. She explicitly declined to predict exactly what shape this emergent culture might take: "All the elements, old and new, are jumbled up together until it seems impossible to guess what can be fished out of the middle."³

Yet Suckow had her own idea as to what this distinctly Iowan culture might ultimately look like, and she described it as though culture was a geological formation that could best be envisioned in cross-section. On top was a thinning layer of Iowans' chronic self-deprecation; beneath that lay the outmoded cultural ideals still preserved in the state's colleges, the boosterism of businessmen, and "the Main Street element of small town hardness, dreariness and tense material ambition." Finally, beneath all these lay the farmers, "still the very soil and bedrock of our native culture." Suckow attached tremendous significance to the role of this rural substratum:

Whatever real intrinsic value the culture and art of Iowa can have is founded upon this bedrock. Other elements may influence and vary it, but this is at the bottom of them all....Certainly, without this underlying strong basis, and if it depended merely upon our best people, what we call culture in Iowa would be as insipid as cambric tea.⁴

Suckow's essay addresses a wide range of themes surrounding the creation of an indigenous culture in Iowa, themes which had been discussed almost since the first pioneers crossed the Mississippi into the newly-opened territory in the 1830s. Could a society overwhelmingly reliant on capitalist agriculture eventually produce its own literature, its own art? Suckow's answer typifies an increasingly influential strand of midwestern thought in the early twentieth century. Any authentic middle western culture would have to be predicated on the region's economic base. Spending the region's increasing wealth to import culture could never produce anything of merit; instead, culture would have to spring from the same source as that wealth, from agriculture itself.⁵

Ruth Suckow earnestly believed that she was witnessing the advent of a distinctive midwestern culture in the 1920s. Her optimism was not entirely groundless: she was herself part of an estimable midwestern literary movement, to which Iowa had also contributed Hamlin Garland and Herbert Quick. Indeed, Suckow's essay seems prescient, although it was not writers, but painters, who would receive the most attention as the creators of this emerging midwestern culture. Only two years after Suckow's essay on "Iowa" was published, a distinguished, elderly resident of Cedar Rapids sat for his portrait. His portraitist, a local artist named Grant Wood, chose to depict his subject standing before a map of Linn County as it appeared in the 1870s, bounded by engravings of frontier

businesses and homesteads. “Portrait of John B. Turner, Pioneer” was clearly intended to convey the state’s rapid development, the astonishing changes which had taken place within the lifetime of the sitter. Although it is not a scene of rural life, there is something recognizably midwestern about this portrait, and the resolute expression on Mr. Turner’s face. Wood’s “Portrait of John B. Turner” may be seen as heralding the new midwestern school of painting that would come to be known as regionalism. Anxious to promote his work, Wood decided to exhibit the painting in the only forum where it would certainly be viewed by thousands of Iowans, and so entered it in the Art Salon competition at the 1929 Iowa State Fair. In doing so, he added the latest voice to a cultural debate that stretched back to the fair’s, and the state’s, origins.⁶

State and county agricultural fairs were tremendously important institutions in nineteenth-century America, especially in the Middle West. American agricultural fairs originated in New England, but the middle west’s overwhelmingly rural society and relative sparsity of settlement enhanced the significance of these annual exhibitions. Soon after settlers had erected their homes and communities, they typically chartered a county agricultural society, whose expressed purpose was to disseminate knowledge of scientific agriculture, and whose primary occupation was to conduct an annual fair at harvest time. The Iowa State Agricultural Society (ISAS) was founded in 1853 and conducted the first Iowa State Fair, appropriately enough, in Fairfield the following year. During the first twenty-five years of its existence, the fair was moved to a new site every other year to afford a greater number of the state’s residents at least an occasional opportunity to attend. As the fair grew larger, however, it became desirable to create a permanent fairground. Des Moines, the state’s capital, was centrally located and well-served by railroads. The fair moved to Des Moines in 1879, acquired permanent grounds in 1886, and has remained there since.⁷

According to the Society’s constitution, ISAS existed for “the promotion of Agriculture, Horticulture, Manufactures Mechanics, and Household Arts.” The early state fairs, in keeping with the tenets of their organizers, were ostensibly earnest agricultural exhibitions, designed to encourage and reward superior agricultural products, to apprise farmers of new techniques in raising crops and livestock, and to afford them an opportunity to see, and, it was hoped, purchase new farm implements to make their task easier.

At the same time, however, the annual fair was also a social gathering and a much-needed source of entertainment. In the fair’s early years, the Society’s policy toward amusements, games, and sideshows was to keep most of them literally beyond the pale — that is outside the walls of the fairgrounds, where they lined the roads leading to the grounds, cajoling money from the fair’s patrons both coming and going. Eventually, however, the Society’s directors began to admit more entertainments into the fair in order to attract visitors and raise the prize money with which to reward its agricultural exhibitors.

Tensions between the fair's agricultural mission and its entertainment features persisted throughout its first century, and the fair's managers were never altogether without reservations about the appropriateness of amusements at a fair officially consecrated to agricultural education. Even in the early twentieth century, when entertainments had indisputably become the fair's major drawing card, both the fair's managers and its patrons continued to insist that agriculture was in some sense the "soul" of the fair, without which it could not exist. Indeed, this claim regarding the primacy of agriculture became more shrill as it became less true, reaching its height in the 1920s and 1930s.

This growing anxiety over the fair's amusements stemmed ultimately from the broad economic and demographic changes overtaking American agriculture in these years, particularly the collapse of commodity prices after World War I, and from urbanization, which, according to the 1920 census, had rendered farmers a minority group for the first time in the history of the republic. The more immediate cause, however, was the advent of mass entertainments such as motion pictures and radio, which alleviated some of the cultural isolation of farm life, but also portended the end of a distinctively rural civilization by disseminating the styles and values of urban America to the hinterlands. The fair's art exhibit must be viewed against this background of chronic tension between agriculture and entertainment at the fair and the rapid changes in mass culture after the first World War.⁸

The fair's art exhibit is significant precisely because it does not fit neatly on either side of the cleavage between the fair's agricultural and educational mission and its role as a purveyor of entertainment which has been sketched out so far. Art fell somewhere in between: like agricultural commodities, it was produced, exhibited, and judged. Yet it was not commonly regarded as a necessary product, since it served no apparent function other than to delight its beholders. To make matters more troublesome, art was not susceptible to the purportedly scientific criteria employed in the agricultural contests: *who* judged the art obviously determined the eventual winner. Yet, if art judging was highly subjective, it also became the province of "experts" trained in painting and drawing. As a writer for *Wallace's Farmer* remarked after the 1930 fair,

It was great fun to stand off and try to pick out what seemed to be the best painting, then to walk closer and note what picture had actually taken the blue ribbon. This pastime at least proved that judging art is no job for amateurs. The guesses were wrong very frequently.⁹

Art judging was a mysterious business, encompassing both personal opinion and established canons of taste. Because the position of art at the State Fair was somewhat anomalous, it could be either a repository of traditional values or a

menacing harbinger of change, and it was widely seen as an especially sensitive barometer of not only Iowans' cultural attainments, but their values as well. At stake in the art competition was much more than ribbons.

Nineteenth-century European and American fairs had commonly allowed room for artistic exhibits alongside their displays of livestock, agricultural produce, and manufactured goods. The founders of the Iowa State Agricultural Society, like other American agriculturists, earnestly believed that their efforts to improve the state's agricultural economy would lay the groundwork for the eventual development of other industries and the arts, and so included prizes for painting in the premium list for the first state fair in 1854. Miss Jane Funk of Jefferson won the art competition at that inaugural state fair, receiving a premium of one dollar for exhibiting the best floral painting.¹⁰

Painting, in the fair's classification of premiums, had not yet been fully accorded the status of a fine art, but was instead only one among many "arts," as yet undifferentiated from skills and crafts. Relegated to the final category (variously headed "Inventions, &c." or "Miscellaneous") in the fair's premium list, "Best oil painting" was commonly lumped together with "Best improvement for roofing houses" and "Best lot of pressed brick."¹¹ Nonetheless, consignment to the final category of the premium list need not be seen as merely an afterthought, but may even be regarded as an indication that painting and other "arts" were regarded as the very pinnacle of the fair's exhibits, the tiny but important apex of a cultural pyramid built atop a massive base of livestock, agricultural produce, and machinery. In either case, art was situated as far as possible from the agricultural competitions in the fair's design.

Amid a fair devoted primarily to displays of livestock and farm implements, the art exhibit was typically considered one of the few fair departments of particular interest to women, and most entrants in the exhibit, especially in the fair's earlier decades, were female.¹² The predominance of women, however, does not indicate that fine art had been consigned to a position of comparative neglect by the men who managed the fair. Painting, along with other arts and crafts, was a leisurely pastime, reserved for those whose energies were, at least supposedly, not devoted to agricultural production. While, in some essential sense, art was not "necessary," as was the production of food, it was nonetheless esteemed as a more elevated and refined activity.¹³

Those who attended the fair certainly did not neglect the arts. The Fine Art Hall was consistently among the most crowded of the fair's exhibits, perhaps for the obvious reason that most Iowans could look at cattle and pigs any day of the year, while the opportunity to examine the newest inventions and view paintings came infrequently. But the display's popularity cannot be ascribed to mere novelty. It was widely regarded as a measure of Iowa's cultural progress; upon viewing the 1859 exhibit, a reporter for the *Northwest Farmer* wrote confidently that "We shall expect to see these and other branches of the fine arts flourish in

our State, in proportion to the increase of settlements, wealth and refinement.”¹⁴ In the words of another agricultural journal, the exhibit was nothing less than a compendium of “the all of everything that our State has attained in the beautiful, ingenious or intelligent.”¹⁵ Observing with satisfaction the enormous interest in the arts displayed at the 1882 fair, the *Iowa State Register* contended that the art exhibit was “the attraction par excellence, the crowning glory of the fabric,” and the sole exhibit in which all Iowans could find a common ground among the fair’s diversity.

The farmer is charmed with the bountiful display in the Agricultural Department and in Horticultural Hall; the inventor and the mechanic investigate earnestly the new and wonderful combinations in the intricate machinery; the stock breeder looks with admiring fondness at the display of sleek, well-fed animals — the moving, living wealth in which he takes such great delight; the lovers of the horse crowd the amphitheater to watch the contests of speed and endurance in which their favorite engages; the business man deserts the office or store, and conceals his ignorance of the things about him by a well-bred affectation of knowledge as he passes through the departments more especially devoted to agriculture; but all,— farmer, inventor, mechanic, stock man, lover of fast horses, and business man,— with their wives and children, throng **FINE ART HALL**, and each individual finds somewhere within its limits something to fill a craving of his nature which God implanted there, and which neither the sight of the production of the soil, the herds of animals, the half-living machinery, the beautiful flowers, nor the speed of the fastest animals, can ever supply.¹⁶

The experience of viewing art at the early fairs could only emphasize the problematic status of painting in Iowa. For example, a visitor to the Fine Art Gallery at the 1856 fair entered through the door on the north, passing by displays of embroidery, needlework, quilting, reptiles and insects, a two-headed calf, photographs, penmanship, stonecarving, surveyors’ instruments, “various school apparatus,” including an orrery, a tellurian, globes, and a gyroscope, before at last reaching the paintings.¹⁷ Doubtless the organizers of the fine art exhibit intended to suggest some sort of cultural hierarchy through the exhibit’s arrangement; on the other hand, it is also possible that the paintings came last because that is where the wall was. Sometimes the exhibit could be even less well organized. The art judging committee at the 1867 fair filed a complaint afterward, urging “that in the future all articles of the same class be grouped [together]. It is a serious inconvenience, and one leading to very uncertain results, to have one article in any

given class at one end of the hall and another competing with it placed at the opposite end.”¹⁸ The problem persisted: more than twenty years later, art judge N. B. Collins bemoaned “the great difficulty attending to the work of judging the art display of the fair...with the competing pictures hung on walls 15 to 20 feet high and scattered and mixed like needles in a haystack.”¹⁹

The qualifications of the judges themselves were often another source of dissatisfaction with the art exhibit. ISAS Secretary Joshua Shaffer complained after the 1870 fair that the reports of the committees in the Fine Arts division “are unsatisfactory — both in matter and in manner.”²⁰ Many of these art judges, like those in other divisions of the fair, lacked any particular expertise their field, and were often selected simply because they would consent to perform what typically proved a difficult and thankless task. In the early decades of the fair, judges often had to be rounded up on the fairgrounds; as the Secretary reminded one critic of the art judging, “Committee are not appointed until the day of examination.”²¹ While the fair’s livestock competitions began to be overseen by expert judges in the 1870s and 1880s, the art exhibit remained the province of amateurs until the early twentieth century.

Numerous other problems confounded the Society’s desire to present a satisfactory art exhibit. The “Fine Art Hall” was invariably a hastily-constructed, floorless building, which left the paintings vulnerable to the elements, the ubiquitous dust, and the threat of fire. As with many other departments of the fair, it was commonly argued by ISAS members, journalists, and fairgoers alike that a better building would immediately summon forth a better exhibit.²²

For all of these reasons, the art show was for decades typified by the spotty quality of entries and unspecified criteria for awarding premiums, and it was generally agreed to lag far behind the fair’s other exhibits. To the distress of many observers, art was failing to keep pace with the state’s rapid material growth. The *Western Farm Journal*, describing the 1873 fair, stated that the Fine Art Hall “justly demands most attention from visitors because [it is] most defective in supplies in comparison to its importance to our future development.” According to the journal,

The few articles of fine art production are insignificant, totally unworthy of comparison with the results of other branches of Iowa education, scarcely a single sincere lesson from nature among the whole of them. Almost all of them inevitably copies from others and inevitably inferior to them. Feeble attempts to re-produce the fashions of feeble art schools, but not a single effort at original design or execution, either upon paper or canvas, or in stone, wood, or wax. Not an engraving or original pictorial lithograph. The State pays, every day, for importing large quantities of these articles, and continues tributary in public opinion and public morals to the headquarters which

furnish them, while abundant talent to produce them remains dormant in our midst.²³

“With the exception of paintings,” noted the *Iowa State Register* in 1879, the fair’s “display is equal in every respect to those of other exhibitions, and superior in many respects.”²⁴ Three years later, the *Iowa Homestead*, after surveying the extensive array of items in the Fine Art Hall, wondered, “But where was the fine art? Certainly not in the paintings, with the exception of a few of the water colors, and possibly half a dozen of the oil paintings.”²⁵

Despite sporadic attempts to upgrade the quality of the art show, it remained the fair’s weakest department for decades. Around 1890, however, the effort to improve this division began to acquire a new degree of coherence and vigor, as a growing number of observers became convinced that the state was at last due for a fine art exhibit worthy of the name. In 1889, the exhibit was divided into professional and amateur classes in an effort to distinguish serious artists from hobbyists. The following year, according to the *Register*, brought a number of improvements, “not only in the character of the work, but especially in the management.” For the first time in the fair’s history, the exhibit had been carefully classified and arranged, “making it possible for the person awarding the premiums to see the work side by side and thus be enabled to judge more correctly of the comparative merits of each.”²⁶

Such reforms spurred some hope that artistic progress had at last come to Iowa. The *Register* remarked in 1891 that, with a few exceptions, most of the art displays were quite good, “while only a few years ago most of it was positively bad.”²⁷ The following year, another *Register* reporter noted, reassuringly, “that there are no atrocities this year exhibited, such as portraits painted in frying pans or landscapes in bread bowls and on shovels.”²⁸

Despite these improvements, however, complaints about the quality of the show and the competence of its judges continued to vex the fair.²⁹ Angered that the judges had passed over his entries when bestowing their awards at the 1895 fair, E. Everson of Des Moines declared the judges “know-nothings,” and fumed that “As long as Field [W. W., of Odebolt] is running the art Hall there will be nothing but these ould copeys in the Hall that have been there for 15 years over and over. work dun by amatures and children but I will bring no work to the Fair for children to Laugh at.”³⁰

Complaints such as this began to gain in number and influence, not to mention coherence, as more observers became impatient with the state’s lack of cultural advance. A lengthy editorial in the *Des Moines Leader* in 1896 brooded that

The display of drawings and paintings at the state fair this year was of such a character as to set one thinking of the condition of the pictorial art in Iowa. In no other department of the fair could there be found such a medley of good and bad. Some of

it was in touch with the most advanced ideas of the times and some with the extreme backwoods of a primitive civilization. It is to be regretted that the management does not discriminate and encourage only that which is in direct line with the art world; that which could be recognized by the institutions which lay the foundation for real art and pass judgement upon the finished product.³¹

The editorial went on to accuse state and county fairs of “crimes against the progress of art,” and to call for a thorough examination of the method of selecting and judging entries to the fair’s art show.

In the editorialist’s view, only one Iowan possessed the requisite credentials and stature to uplift the condition of art in the state: Charles Atherton Cumming. An accomplished academic painter, Cumming had studied at the Chicago Academy of Design (later the Art Institute of Chicago) and the Academie Julien in Paris. Upon completing his training, Cumming returned to Iowa, where he founded the Department of Fine Arts at his alma mater, Cornell College, and later the Department of Art at the University of Iowa. His abiding concern, however, was his own private school of art in Des Moines, where he taught academic drawing and painting to scores of devoted students.³²

Cumming had definite opinions about painting and the State Fair’s role in fostering art in Iowa, which he detailed in a letter to the *Leader* in 1897. “We do not want a standard set before us that is a relic of some old time country fair,” he wrote, arguing that, “Out here in Iowa the only reasonable thing for us to do is to follow the lead set by those who know.” For Cumming, this meant emulating the example of French salon painters. Iowans might participate in “high” culture, but they were in no position to originate it.

Cumming was well aware that the fair’s art competition was, for better or worse, by far the state’s most influential art exhibit, and felt that, with a few improvements, it could be used to advance Iowa’s artistic development. He contended, as had a host of critics before him, that a suitable, permanent building was the first requisite for attracting a worthy art exhibit. Even good paintings looked “miserable” in the existing, dimly-lighted hall. Second, Cumming argued that the fair’s distinction between amateur and professional painters was irrelevant and would have to be abolished, since many untrained artists had no compunction about selling their works and offering instruction, while scores of properly trained artists earned no money from their work. Henceforth, all entrants should compete on an equal basis and be judged according to a single, academic standard of excellence. Given these reforms, Cumming predicted, “the best class of painters in the state would be seen at the fair.”³³

By 1899, the State Agricultural Society had decided, in the words of the *Des Moines Leader*, “to have a real art show or else give up the effort to have any at all,” and commissioned Cumming to overhaul the fair’s fine arts department. He

responded by promulgating a series of rules governing the entry, display, and judging of paintings. After no small amount of pleading, he also secured the society's agreement to erect a Fine Art Hall, so that the show could be separated from other exhibits.³⁴ Significantly, this decidedly unimposing Fine Art Hall was built adjacent to the much larger main exhibition building, atop the fairground's imposing (by Iowa's topographical standards, anyway) hill—yet another reminder of art's ambiguous status as both the pinnacle and one of the least well-developed of the fair's exhibits.³⁵ Cumming promised in February 1899 that, as a result of his reforms, "the horrible nightmares that have offended the artistic eye of the state under the guise of 'art' in the art hall probably will be seen no more."³⁶

If the nightmares vanished, the conflicts could not be gotten rid of so easily. Cumming had rewritten the rules for the art show, but it remained for the State Agricultural Society to administer them. As the fair approached, Cumming began to circulate complaints regarding Superintendent L. H. Pickard's selection of Mrs. F. H. (Fannie) Schoenhut of Marshalltown as the art show's judge.³⁷ Only two days before the fair's scheduled opening, Cumming visited the fairground to register his displeasure in person, insisting to fair officials that the judge be a trained expert on art, and be brought in from outside the state. ISAS President W. F. Harriman replied that, "If Iowa people are sufficiently artistic to make exhibits in such a department, Iowa people ought to be competent to judge them." Upon hearing this, Cumming announced that he would not allow his work to be displayed and would discourage others from entering the exhibit as well. Cumming, who had been appointed to improve the art exhibit, now appeared ready to scuttle it altogether.³⁸

Cumming and the fair's directors quickly managed to patch up their differences, and students of his Des Moines school of art began to form a large contingent of the show's entrants.³⁹ Still, the art show continued to disappoint many fairgoers, and, in his report on the 1913 exposition, Fair Board Secretary Arthur Corey remarked bluntly that "it is a well-known fact that we have been unable to induce anyone to exhibit anything of value or worthy of mention," recommending that the art exhibit once again be moved, this time from its wooden-frame building (popularly and derisively known as the "Art Barn") to the basement of the newly-constructed Women's and Children's Building, along with yet another "thorough revision of the classification" of the art show.⁴⁰

Once again, Cumming responded to the Fair Board's call, this time agreeing to become superintendent of the art exhibit, and he immediately set out to improve the quality of the display. Henceforth, a catalog of the show would be published, and the Fair Board would appropriate money to procure a non-competitive exhibit of American paintings, so that, according to Cumming, fairgoers could gauge the condition of art in Iowa relative to the work of the country's best-known painters. Once again Cumming abolished what he regarded as a spurious distinction between professionals and amateurs, which had crept back into the show's rules. When the fair was over, the *Register and Leader* proclaimed that the

ART EXHIBIT AT THE FAIR SETS NEW STANDARD FOR THE STATE.⁴¹

The art show, like many of the fair's other departments before it, was at last being transformed, bureaucratized, professionalized: paintings would no longer be juxtaposed with dental fixtures and stuffed sparrows, no longer hung in an "Art Barn," but henceforth, would adorn the walls of the fair's "Art Salon." As the official catalog for the 1916 fair put it, "Of late years the rules and conditions surrounding the exhibit have been made a little stricter, the lines gradually drawn a bit closer, the idea being to exclude all productions unworthy of merit and to raise the standard of the exhibit."⁴² Art was beginning to be taken very seriously.

In part, Cumming agreed to head the fair's art exhibit precisely because he realized that an increasing number of Iowans were capable of painting seriously.⁴³ His primary motive, however, was to insure conservative dominance of the state's artistic institutions. In the wake of modern art's sensational arrival in America at the 1913 Armory Show in New York, ripples could be felt as far away as Iowa, and Cumming could not help but perceive the imminent threat to academic painting in the United States. In addition to assuming control of the state fair's art exhibit, Cumming also presided over the founding of the Iowa Art Guild in September, 1914. He hoped that this new organization would publicize and expand the influence of his art school throughout the state, and also provide a bulwark against "the passing freakish tendencies in 'modern art.'"⁴⁴ In addition, the Guild's manifesto declared that the state "forms a unit of sufficient importance and individual character to justify its people in making its own expression and recording its own history."⁴⁵ Thus, although it was the chief importer of a "foreign" style of painting, the Guild was also sensitive to Iowans' nascent sense of cultural self-sufficiency.

Cumming continued to preside over the state fair's Art Salon until 1926, during which time he became an increasingly virulent opponent of modern art. He began to refer openly to academic painting as the "white man's art," insisting that it represented the pinnacle of humans' artistic evolution. Cumming credited academic painting with liberating the white race from the merely "symbolic" art forms that still held sway over the "primitive races," and that also constituted the basis for "modern" painting. He was little short of paranoid that proponents of modern art were infiltrating the state's universities and even attempting to commandeer his own school in Des Moines, and he feared that most Americans were "not enough educated in art to defend themselves against this encroaching blight."⁴⁶ He felt called to do whatever he could to educate them.

In 1925, the growing tension between academic and modern artists in Iowa became apparent when the state fair's art judging was abruptly postponed because, according to Cumming, the judge, Frances Cranmer Greenman of Minneapolis, had suddenly become ill. When Greenman herself disputed this, Cumming was forced to disclose the true nature (and gravity) of her affliction:

“Mrs. Greenman has been converted to what she calls ‘modern’ art since I last viewed her exhibit. Here in Iowa our artists are followers of ‘white man’s art,’ which is directly opposed to the modern ‘jazz’ art.”⁴⁷

Greenman’s replacement, J. Laurie Wallace of Omaha, easily received a clean bill of health from Dr. Cumming. “I have no sympathy for most of this modernist stuff,” Wallace declared, adding that such artistic “vogues” as Picasso, Matisse, and Gauguin would soon be forgotten, as artists began once again to create works “conforming to nature, representative, and holding within their own field.”⁴⁸ To academic artists such as Wallace and Cumming, Cubism and Expressionism were not simply bad art, but were threatening as well, for they undermined art’s worth as a repository of changeless aesthetic values. According to Wallace, in modern art “standards are demoralized, and there is no criterion for evaluation. Lines of demarcation break down. It is argued that you can’t judge such works on the basis of color, form, line; so what sort of artistic standards must one fall back on?”⁴⁹

After the 1926 fair, Cumming determined that neither his health nor finances would permit him to continue leading the resistance to modernism in Iowa, and he retired to California to devote himself to his writings, convinced that he was, in his own words, “inspired as a prophet with a message for the world.” He outlined, but failed to complete, a treatise to be titled *A Defense of the White Man’s Art*, and a companion piece on *Democracy and the White Man’s Art*.⁵⁰

The argument in Iowa over artistic standards was not stilled by Cumming’s departure, and for a few years, conservatives were able to maintain the upper hand. Upon Cumming’s resignation, the Fair Board entrusted the Art Salon to another conservative, Zenobia Ness of Ames, who taught drawing at Iowa State College and chaired the art committee of the Iowa Federation of Women’s Clubs, which had made a concerted effort to foster “art appreciation” throughout the state.⁵¹ During Ness’s first two years as head of the Art Salon, Cumming’s students continued to dominate the competition. Then, in 1929, “modern” art invaded the salon, arriving not via Paris or New York, but from Cedar Rapids.

At last Iowa appeared to be on the cusp of the very sort of indigenous culture outlined by Ruth Suckow. The demise of conservative control over the fair’s art exhibit can be traced to 1929, when Grant Wood won the grand prize for his portrait of “John D. Turner, Pioneer.” Wood, an Iowa native, had spent several years in France studying and emulating European painting. During a trip to Germany in 1928, he had been impressed by the austerity of Flemish painting, and, upon his return to Iowa, began to apply a similarly spare style to midwestern subjects and landscapes, all the while proclaiming his desire to break free from the dominance of European art. Such is the curious genealogy of what quickly came to be known as midwestern regionalist painting, a movement most commonly associated with Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, and John Steuart Curry, but encompassing scores of lesser-known artists as well.⁵²

For an accomplished painter, one who had exhibited at Parisian galleries, to compete for premiums at the somewhat less-than-glamorous Iowa State Fair Art Salon was uncommon. At the same time, the Art Salon was by far the most widely-attended and well-publicized art exhibition in the state, and was in fact the only art gallery in which many Iowans ever set foot. If Wood were to inculcate broad-based support for his regionalist aesthetic, the fair was the place to do it. Additionally, the fair seemed a peculiarly apt site for the display of Wood's scenes of midwestern life. Although his canvases would have earned him expulsion from the Cumming School of Art, Wood won almost immediate acclaim in Iowa, and proceeded to dominate the Art Salon in the early 1930s. In 1930, Wood won both the grand prize and first place in the landscape category for "Portrait of Arnold Pyle" (later retitled "Arnold Comes of Age") and "Stone City," respectively. The following year he continued his string of grand prizes with "The Appraisal," a pointed juxtaposition of a plump, stodgy, middle-aged city woman and a radiantly healthy, happy farm woman. In 1932, Wood won again, this time for "Fall Plowing," a nostalgic landscape, foregrounded by a horse-drawn steel plow, an implement rapidly lapsing into obsolescence in an era of increasingly mechanized farming. After four consecutive victories, Wood voluntarily withdrew from competition in the fair's Art Salon, although he continued to exhibit his works there until 1934.⁵³

The fair had provided Wood an opportunity to gain recognition for himself and his paintings. Now, as the unofficial leader of Iowa's burgeoning regionalist movement, he attempted to institutionalize his new school of painting. In 1932, Wood, along with Adrian Dornbusch and Edward Rowan, established their celebrated artists' colony at Stone City, some fifteen miles northeast of Cedar Rapids. For two summers, this tiny town, its physical setting dominated by the massive quarry that lent it its name, became the focal point of Iowa's artistic scene, as Wood and a remarkable collection of faculty and students attempted to create a haven within which regionalism could flourish.⁵⁴ After only two years, however, Wood abandoned the relative informality of the colony for a more official role in Iowa's art scene. In 1934, he became director of the New Deal's Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) in Iowa and accepted a position in the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Iowa.

Despite Wood's success and his personal popularity (he had by this time become famous nationwide and had assumed Cumming's mantle as the most influential figure in Iowa's artistic circles), the fate of regionalism was less secure, both in Iowa and throughout the United States. Wood's credentials, particularly his directorship of the Iowa PWAP, handed him a powerful lever with which to elevate the status of regionalism, but he would rapidly discover that not everyone welcomed his contribution to American art. Most disappointing of all, many of Iowa's self-styled regionalist painters accepted neither Wood's particular vision of regionalism nor the sometimes heavy-handed way in which he used his control of government patronage to promote it.⁵⁵

Although he denied charges that he was attempting to impose any particular style on midwestern painters, Wood had his own vision of regionalism, and was the only regionalist who attempted to institutionalize and codify the movement. Wood issued a regionalist manifesto of sorts in 1935, publishing “Revolt Against the City,” a pamphlet ghost-written by University of Iowa professor Frank Luther Mott.⁵⁶ Specifically, the pamphlet stated that regionalism was nothing more than “an honest reliance by the artist upon subject matter which he can best interpret because he knows it best.”⁵⁷ As the essay’s title suggests, however, regionalism had broader implications, and constituted a defiant gesture toward not only Paris and New York, but urbanization in general.

Yet Wood’s call to “Revolt” against European and urban culture, like many manifestoes, overstated the case. His own work derived its sparseness from Northern European painting and its highly stylized quality from the conventions of modern design, and many other regionalists were deeply interested in artistic currents in Europe and New York.⁵⁸ Yet, in another sense, Wood’s essay expresses an important truth about regionalism: it was an oppositional term, one defined by what it was *not*. Regionalism could not be distilled into a single stylistic, thematic, or political program. Instead, it represented a self-assertion on the part of midwestern painters, who felt impelled to declare their cultural independence from the established capitals of the art world, to assert that they did not need to leave the midwest in order to find artistic instruction, inspiration, or appreciative viewers.⁵⁹ These claims, which seem unremarkable today, were bold declarations in the 1930s.

Nationally, regionalism sparked impassioned debate in both art journals and popular magazines. At one extreme stood Thomas Craven, art critic for the *New York American*, who championed the regionalists’ efforts to cure America’s cultural inferiority complex and to develop an artistic style appropriate to the rough-and-tumble American environment. As for detractors, and there were plenty, regionalists were caught in a crossfire between staunch conservatives, in whose eyes their paintings were amateurish at best, and radicals, typified by Stuart Davis, who assailed regionalist paintings for projecting a wistful, bucolic vision of farm life, which obscured the hardships and indignities endured by rural Americans in the midst of the Great Depression. Indeed, Davis went so far as to insinuate that the “slight burp” that regionalists had made in American art was symptomatic of “the stomach ulcer of Fascism.”⁶⁰

Regionalism stirred controversy in Iowa as well, and nowhere was this more apparent than at the annual state fair. In 1933, art judge Rene d’Harnoncourt (later, director of the Museum of Modern Art) awarded blue ribbons to two of Wood’s colleagues from the Stone City colony, Adrian Dornbusch and Arnold Pyle, in the oil and watercolor competitions, respectively. Harnoncourt cited their works as evidence of an indigenous American art arising in the Midwest, and praised them for conveying “a very strong individuality....directly reflective of the locality.”⁶¹

The following year, however, regionalism was dealt an apparent setback when superintendent Zenobia Ness enlisted Louis Le Beaume, president of the St. Louis Art Museum, to judge the contest. Although Le Beaume ultimately awarded the grand prize, along with lavish praise, to a regionalist work, "The Butchering," by Thomas Savage of Fort Dodge, a farmer who had studied at Wood's Stone City colony, his tastes were nonetheless regarded as too conservative by many regionalist painters, who protested his appointment as art judge.⁶²

It was by now evident that some regionalists were becoming increasingly radical, both aesthetically and politically. In an attempt to mollify them, Ness determined that henceforth the judge of the Art Salon would be selected by a vote of the artists themselves, a policy that, whatever its merits, could only make the subjective and increasingly factionalized nature of art judging more apparent to fairgoers. Ostensibly done to appease the regionalists, Ness's decision was in fact a shrewd piece of electioneering, containing as it did a grandfather clause of sorts: any artist who had ever entered the fair's art show was eligible to vote for the art judge. Although regionalism had gained a significant and growing number of adherents, it could not match the legions of conservative artists who had predominated at the fair for decades. Thus, when the ballots were tallied in 1935, the regionalist candidate, Dewey Albinson of Minneapolis, was defeated by Frederic Tellander, a Chicago artist and avowed conservative. As the *Des Moines Register* reported, the outcome reflected a party-line split between regionalists and alumni of the Cumming School of Art.⁶³

To their dismay, conservative artists soon discovered that Tellander did not adhere to the artistic spoils system, when he awarded the grand prize to a regionalist work, "River Bend," by Marvin Cone of Cedar Rapids, yet another of Wood's colleagues from Stone City, and second prize to "Country Gas Station," by Harry D. Jones of Des Moines.⁶⁴ The conservative majority appeared to have voted itself out of power, albeit unwittingly.

But, in addition to the election of the art judge, an art referendum of a different sort was also held in 1935, and it boded well for more traditional painters. Ness, in another attempt to circumvent the judges' preference in recent years for works which many Iowans did not appreciate, instituted a "popularity prize," to be awarded at the fair's close to the entry receiving the most votes from fair visitors.⁶⁵ Some 80,000 people, roughly one-quarter of the fair's visitors, cast ballots, and when they were tallied, the *Des Moines Register* was able to report that Iowans had "evened the score" with Judge Tellander, preferring quaint paintings of spinning wheels and swans to the unfamiliar-looking scenes in Cone's and Jones's works: "Angular paintings by modern artists may win prizes from the Iowa state fair art salon's official judge, but results of a popularity ballot proved the tall corn state's citizens still like their pictures lifelike, pretty and conservative."⁶⁶ Although this discrepancy between the judges' tastes and those of ordinary Iowans would persist throughout the decade, the popularity prize would not. The attempt to lend a measure of popular sovereignty to the art exhibit, which

was at utterly odds with the fair's longstanding practice of entrusting judges to discern and reward excellence, was discontinued after only one year.

In any case, academic painters had never staked the value of their work on popular approval, and such approval could not restore their control over the state fair's art show in the heyday of regionalism. Alice McKee Cumming, widow of the conservatives' mentor and herself an accomplished painter, complained bitterly during the 1935 fair that the art exhibit had degenerated into nothing more than "a homespun county fair art show, glorified by the name the Iowa art salon." She claimed that the exhibit no longer held any interest for the state's "real painters," who "prefer to present their works in dignified exhibitions in cultural centers of the east."⁶⁷

Controversy continued to plague the Art Salon in 1936, when the appropriateness of judging works of art at all was called into question. The Iowa Co-operative Artists, a regionalist artists' union led by Francis Robert White, director of Cedar Rapids's Little Gallery, argued that the Fair Board should no longer force artists to "gamble" for prizes, but should instead *pay* them a rental fee for allowing their work to be displayed. Although the art exhibit had been accorded tremendous importance in recent decades, the Fair Board was hardly disposed to treat it differently from the fair's other exhibits, and to abandon its longstanding practice of staging competitions and offering premiums only to the winners. When the board denied the union's request, its members boycotted the exhibition.⁶⁸

The formation of the Co-operative Artists signalled a new cleavage in Iowa's artistic spectrum. The union comprised regionalists who had grown disenchanted under Grant Wood's tenure as director of the Public Works of Art Project in Iowa. Many of these artists complained that Wood had done too little to assist lesser-known regionalists, and that his tight supervision of his own mural projects left scant room for individual creativity by the artists executing the designs. Additionally, these artists' works shared more in common, both aesthetically and politically, with Social Realism than with the archetypal midwestern scenes and light satire favored by Wood.⁶⁹ Notwithstanding the boycott by the Co-operative Artists, regionalist predominance in the annual art show was preserved by Wood's protégé, Arnold Pyle, who won both the grand prize for "Big Hooks," and first prize in the landscape category.⁷⁰

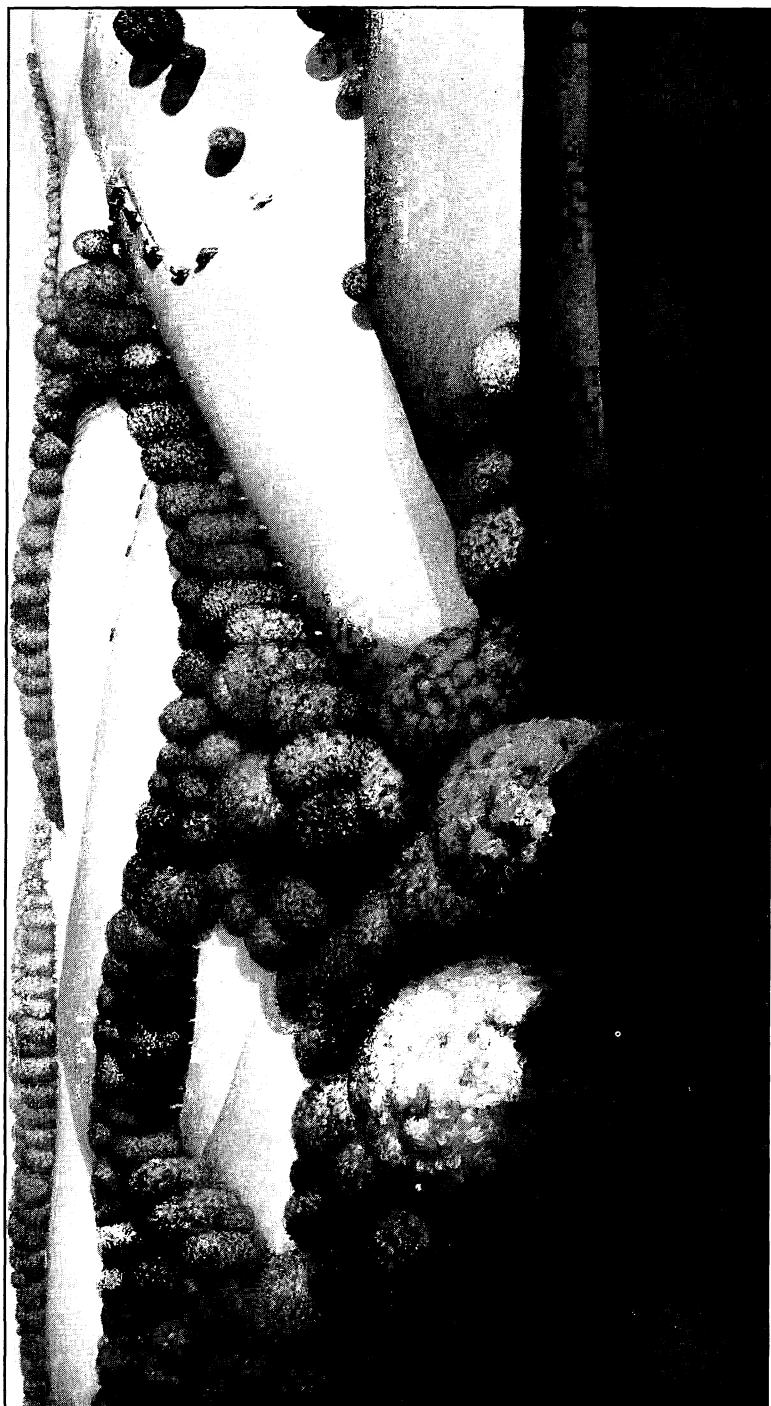
Interneceine strife has been the bane of many radical organizations, and the Co-operative Artists was no exception. Heated disputes, especially over its political orientation, prompted the union's dissolution in 1937, and White and many of his comrades returned to the state fair competition in that year. Dewey Albinson, the "modernist" candidate vanquished in the 1935 election, was chosen art judge, and awarded White the grand prize for "Ages of Man," described by the *Register* as a "starkly realistic street scene of poorly clad characters, workmen, and impoverished women—the sort who pass by the lower priced markets of a city."⁷¹ According to *Wallace's Farmer*, the painting "created much comment,

some finding the picture wholly grotesque, others recognizing the figures as types seen on farms as well as on city streets."⁷²

Even such a mixed review signalled that the regionalist movement had attained a measure of acceptance unthinkable only a few years earlier. The reviews turned considerably less favorable in 1938, however, when the most controversial regionalist to exhibit at the fair, Dan Rhodes of Fort Dodge, won the grand prize for "Painters." Rhodes's canvas, which he later characterized as frankly "proletarian," depicted not artists, but two workmen carrying a ladder.⁷³ The literal-minded quibbled, pointing out that no real painters would carry a ladder side-by-side as did the pair on the canvas, but Rhodes, along with art judge Paul Harris, replied that strict accuracy had been sacrificed to create a more pleasing composition.⁷⁴ *Wallace's Farmer*, displaying its usual degree of bemusement and mild sarcasm toward regionalism, commented that

There were a lot of low-brows who honestly wondered how long it takes for culture to work, as they looked at..."Painters." Not all low-brows, either. Even a college professor was heard asking bewilderingly how he was supposed to react to the art of the composition.⁷⁵

Rhodes had another, much larger work on display at the 1938 fair, and it generated a much larger controversy. Along with Howard Johnson, he had been selected to paint a 218-foot WPA mural of Iowa's history in the fair's Agricultural Building.⁷⁶ This mural, commissioned to commemorate the centennial of Iowa's accession as a federal territory, appears innocuous enough to the modern observer. It commences with a depiction of pioneers driving away the Indians, surveying their newly-conquered lands, plowing their fields, building their houses. Near the center, however, a man sows grain with his left hand, and this alone was sufficient to provoke a furor. Numerous observers complained that this figure was intended as a radical political symbol, some inscrutable mystical sign, or that it was just plain inaccurate (it must be remembered that left-handedness was still widely regarded as a defect to be corrected in young children, by severe means if necessary).⁷⁷ To be sure, it was the apparent political symbolism of the sower that most offended viewers seized on as a grounds for assailing the mural. Karal Ann Marling and M. Sue Kendall have noted the dislike with which Americans responded to murals which they regarded as unflattering to their locale or their way of life. It seems likely that the controversy surrounding the sower was merely a pretext for those who found Rhodes's depiction of Iowans unattractive, and that Rhodes's offense was to paint farmers who were too "hard-looking," rather than left-handed.⁷⁸ Fair officials demanded that the WPA force Rhodes to "correct" the picture, but the Iowa division of the WPA's Federal Art Project was now under the direction of none other than regionalist Francis Robert White, who had no inclination to interfere, and no action was taken.⁷⁹



Near Sundown by Grant Wood, 1933. Courtesy of Spencer Museum of Art/University of Kansas, gift of George Cukor.

Another aspect of the response to Rhodes's mural is especially intriguing. According to *Wallace's Farmer*,

Farm people studied the pictures diffidently. It seemed queer to see farmers made the heroes of enormous drawings, to see farm men and women—some of them pretty hard-looking, too—done on a scale and with colors hitherto reserved for ladies swathed in cheesecloth, representing the Spirit of Liberty. Or gentlemen wrapped in togas and representing Law or Invention or Science or something equally vague and impressive.⁸⁰

Failing in its attempt to compel Rhodes to alter his mural, the Fair Board decided to make an alteration of its own: before the 1939 fair, the painting was captioned with Daniel Webster's often-quoted aphorism (which we might justifiably regard as the unofficial credo of the Iowa State Fair), "When tillage begins, other arts follow. The farmers therefore are the founders of civilization."⁸¹ There can be little doubt that the addition of this caption, which Grant Wood had included in his famous, comparatively benign murals in the Iowa State College Library in Ames, was intended somehow to tame Rhodes's work, and to prompt viewers to "read" it as a paean to the state's material progress and to the farmers who lay at the root of that progress. One regionalist, justly incensed by this tampering with Rhodes's work, responded that

In the first place, the quotation isn't true. Cavemen drawings, representing a highly developed type of art, have been found in Spain. All evidence indicates these primitive people didn't know anything about soil tillage, and yet they were talented artists.⁸²

This was tantamount to heresy, the complete antithesis of the agrarian myth and the historical mission of the Iowa State Fair. Were artists, not farmers, the true founders of civilization? Few Iowans would have acceded to such a claim. The gulf between artist and public had expanded considerably in the decade since Grant Wood had inaugurated the new style of American painting, a style that he had hoped would enlist the allegiance of ordinary middle westerners.

Nonetheless, by the late thirties the regionalists, however controversial, were securely in control of the fair's Art Salon. "Almost everybody's a regionalist now," declared Rhodes in 1939. As Rhodes's remark attests, the definition of "regionalism" had become sufficiently broad to encompass a range of styles, from icons of the virtues of rural life to Social Realist depictions of workers. Rhodes continued to dominate the art show in 1939, when art judge John Steuart Curry awarded him the grand prize for "Bulletin," a depiction of three men catching up

on the latest newspaper account of the European war, and in 1940, when he won again for "Hod Carrier," a characteristically austere portrait of a mason's assistant at work.⁸³ After three consecutive victories, Rhodes retired not only from the fair's competition, but gave up painting altogether.⁸⁴

The regionalist dynasty was preserved in 1941 by Nellie Gebers of Lincoln, whose "Prairie Harvest" was awarded the grand prize in that year.⁸⁵ Art judge Karl S. Bolander detected the prevalence of "a gray tone" and "fierce composition" in the 1941 show, which he interpreted as a response to the war in Europe. "Don't tell me Iowa isn't awake to what's happening in the world," he stated.⁸⁶ The ultimate effect of world events on midwestern painting, however, soon proved far greater than a shift in tone and composition.

The 1941 contest was the final victory for regionalism at the Iowa State Fair Art Salon. The outbreak of war led to the cancellation of the fair for only the second time in its eighty-seven year history. But the war's impact on regionalism was more permanent: war with Germany accomplished what conservative and radical critics by themselves could not, provoking a vicious backlash against "provincial" artists, whose works were likened to officially-sanctioned Nazi art, glorifying *die Volk* and *der Vaterland*. Thus, the opinion of Stuart Davis, dismissed by most Americans as too radical in 1935, had by 1942 gained widespread currency. Barely a decade old, regionalism was dead, another casualty of World War II.⁸⁷

Shortly before the fair reopened in 1946, Fair Board Secretary Lloyd B. Cunningham ordered yet another alteration in Rhodes's and Johnson's mural: he had it taken down and sawed into scrap lumber to build shelving and exhibition booths for the upcoming fair. When questioned about this destruction of a public work of art, one that had been funded by the federal government, Cunningham responded that

The mural wasn't art, it was WPA. It was an insult to Iowa farmers because it depicted them as club-footed, coconut-headed, barrel-necked and low-browed....It was a joke to have that thing on a fairgrounds that's devoted to glorifying the Iowa farmer and his accomplishments.

And anyway I'm sure all Iowa wants to forget the WPA. In fact, I hope that the fair board's move in ripping out this monstrosity may point the way for a lot of other libraries, railroad depots, post offices and other public buildings over the state which were saddled with these so-called art-pieces which were foisted on them.⁸⁸

Grant Wood's objective of creating an indigenous artistic style in the midwest was clearly unworkable by the 1940s. As the resistance encountered by

regionalists at the Iowa State Fair Art Salon demonstrates, they were beset by critics from several directions, confronting dissension within their own ranks, an entrenched circle of academic painters, a Fair Board ill-disposed toward controversial works of art, and a public that did not consistently recognize itself in purportedly “regionalist” paintings. Although Wood had initially believed that the support of ordinary midwesterners would secure regionalism a permanent niche in American painting, the new school enjoyed only a tenuous existence in the volatile, politicized artistic milieu of the 1930s, and could not survive at all afterward.

Ironically, academic and regionalist painters shared some common ground: both schools earnestly desired to see the arts flourish in Iowa, and both were reacting against rapid cultural changes. For the academics, this entailed a veneration for traditional European painting, with its emphasis on technical proficiency, line, color, and light, and an insistence upon conventional subjects. They hoped to transplant this particular strand of European high culture in the midwest, and to erect a hedge against “modern” art of any stripe, including regionalism. Regionalists, of course, claimed to cast off all things European in their quest to develop a distinctively American art. But the regionalists’ disavowal of the tradition of Western painting and their fixation on local subjects were also a reaction against the rapid extension of modern civilization and culture into the midwest. Even those painters who drifted far from the moorings Grant Wood established for regionalism proudly continued to identify themselves as regionalists, and to stake their own claim as midwesterners to create art in their own locale and depicting familiar scenes. Regionalism was not simply the emergence of a “native culture” in the Middle West, as foretold by Ruth Suckow, but a last stand, a final, futile assertion of the primacy of place, in this case a rural, agricultural place, as the fundamental determinant of culture.⁸⁹ This, of course, had also long been the mission of the Iowa State Fair, whose importance as a cultural and educational institution was also being eroded in this era, as the growth of mass communications rendered it unnecessary for people to congregate physically to exchange information and find entertainment.⁹⁰ Both the fair’s protracted identity crisis and the short-lived regionalist experiment were symptomatic of a society succumbing, however reluctantly, to a modern, national mass culture.

Notes

1. Ruth Suckow, “Iowa,” *American Mercury* 9 (September 1926): 39. For more on Suckow’s literary career, see Clarence Andrews, *A Literary History of Iowa* (Iowa City, 1972), 79-101; Leedice McAnnely Kissane, *Ruth Suckow* (New York, 1969).

2. Suckow, “Iowa,” 41.

3. Suckow, “Iowa,” 44.

4. Suckow, “Iowa,” 45.

5. Although it treats a very different time and place, Neil Harris’s study of the role of, as well as the fear of, the arts in the early-nineteenth century U. S. is helpful in the attempt to conceptualize

their role in an overwhelmingly agricultural society such as the late-nineteenth century midwest. See Harris, *The Artist in American Society: The Formative Years, 1790-1860* (New York, 1966; reprinted, Chicago, 1982).

6. For a fascinating overview of the waxing and waning of midwestern self-confidence (as well as proof that Iowa is the quintessential midwestern state), see James R. Shortridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence, 1989). Shortridge's account of the challenge to midwestern cultural autonomy, beginning in the 1920s, and the subsequent "regionalization" of American culture has greatly influenced my understanding of regionalism.

7. For an overview of American agricultural fairs, see Wayne Caldwell Neely, *The Agricultural Fair* (New York, 1935); the role of agricultural societies in nineteenth-century America is thoroughly discussed in Donald B. Marti, *To Improve the Soil and the Mind: Agricultural Societies, Journals and Schools in the Northeastern State, 1791-1865* (Ann Arbor, 1979); on the history of the Iowa State Fair, see Earle D. Ross, "The Iowa State Fair," *Palimpsest* 35, no. 7 (July 1954): 261-324, and Myrtle Beinhauer, "The County, District, and State Agricultural Societies of Iowa," *Annals of Iowa* ser. 3, v. 20, no. 1 (July 1935): 50-69. Management of the state fair would be transferred from ISAS to a department of state government, the State Board of Agriculture, in 1900, and finally to the quasi-public Iowa State Fair Board in 1923.

8. For a more thorough look at this background, see Don Kirschner, *City and Country: Rural Responses to Urbanization* (Westport, Conn., 1970); James H. Shideler, "'Flappers and Philosophers,' and Farmers: Rural-Urban Tensions of the Twenties," *Agricultural History* 47(1973): 283-99; Dorothy Schwieder, "Rural Iowa in the 1920s: Conflict and Community," *Annals of Iowa* 47(1983): 104-15.

9. *Wallace's Farmer and Iowa Homestead* 55(1930): 1446.

10. ISAS, *Report* 1(1854): 18. For an account of the similar, although less contentious, state fair art show held in Iowa's neighbor to the north, see Karal Ann Marling, *Blue Ribbon: A Social and Pictorial History of the Minnesota State Fair* (St. Paul, 1990), 226-39.

11. See the "List of Premiums" published in the *Iowa Farmer and Horticulturalist* 2(1854): 60. See also ISAS, *Report* 1(1854): 18. Lawrence Levine has mapped out the gradual delineation of high and low culture in nineteenth- and early-twentieth century America. Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), esp. 146-60, 200-219.

12. See A. B. Miller to J. R. Shaffer, 28 July 1883, ISAS papers, State Archives, Iowa State Historical Department, Des Moines, Iowa (henceforth, ISAS papers), series AD V, box Sz 1, f. 4.

13. As Ruth Suckow observed, "This thing called culture, in Iowa, has always been accepted as a distinctly feminine affair." Suckow, "Iowa," 40.

14. "History of the Fair," *Northwest Farmer*, quoted in ISAS, *Report* 6(1859): 77.

15. *Iowa Homestead and Western Farm Journal* 15(September 23, 1870): 4. See also the *Iowa State Register* (September 10, 1886), 6, which asserted that "The State Fair is most undoubtedly the place where artists should show their pictures in order that the progress of the State may be noted by the people of the State when this annual gathering of thousands takes place."

16. *Iowa State Register* (September 8, 1882), [4].

17. *North-West Farmer*, quoted in ISAS, *Report* 3(1856): 29.

18. ISAS, *Report* 16(1869): 167. Additionally, the judges recommended that they be allotted more time, and that the paintings be better arranged and lighted.

19. N. B. Collins to Mrs. L. B. James, September 20, 1889, ISAS papers, AD V, box Se 2, f. 6.

20. Joshua M. Shaffer to R. F. Bower, October 1, 1870, ISAS papers, AD V, bk. 16:333. Also John R. Shaffer to Annette Butler, November 4, 1882, bk. 31:381-82.

21. John R. Shaffer to A. B. Miller, August 1, 1883, ISAS papers, AD V, bk. 32:305.

22. See, for instance, John R. Shaffer to E. R. Shankland, November 3, 1882, ISAS papers, AD V, bk. 31:370-71; JRS to A. B. Miller, August 1, 1883, bk. 32:305. See also the *Iowa State Register* (September 8, 1887), 4; (September 1, 1892), 6.

23. *Western Farm Journal* 18(September 26, 1873): [1].

24. *Iowa State Register* (September 4, 1879), [4]. The following year, the Register contended that all the fair's displays were meritorious, "except that of fine arts in the stricter sense of art." *Register*, (September 11, 1880), [1]; see also [3].

25. *Iowa Homestead* 27(September 15, 1882): 4. See also *Iowa State Register* (September 8, 1887), 4.

26. *Iowa State Register* (September 4, 1890), 6.

27. *Iowa State Register* (September 2, 1891), 5.

28. *Iowa State Register* (September 1, 1892), 6.

29. See, for example, Mrs. H. Perrior to John R. Shaffer, September 1889, ISAS papers, AD V, box Se 2, f. 9; Mrs. P. L. Fields to JRS, September 16, 1889, box Se 2, f. 7; JRS to W. W. Field, September 21, 1893, bk. 46:594-95.

30. E. Everson to P. L. Fowler, August 22, 1895, ISAS papers, AD V, box Sz 2, f. 19.

31. "Art in Iowa," *Des Moines Leader* (September 13, 1896), 4.

32. On Cumming, see Bess Ferguson, with Velma Rayness and Edna Gouwens, *Charles Atherton Cumming: Iowa's Pioneer Artist-Educator* (Des Moines, 1972). Cumming headed the Des Moines Academy of Art from 1895 to 1900, at which time he created the Cumming School of Art.

33. *Des Moines Leader* (September 18, 1897), 5. Neil Harris has commented on the role of world's fairs in cultivating artistic taste, and on the fairs' eventual replacement by museums as important centers for art exhibits. Neil Harris, "Museums, Merchandising and the Popular Taste," in Harris, *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America* (Chicago, 1990), esp. 58-63, 77.

34. *Des Moines Leader* (August 26, 1899); ISAS, *Report 46*(1899): 22, 28, 99. Also G. H. Van Houten to L. H. Pickard, February 6, 1899, ISAS papers, AD V, bk. 54:47; GHV to LHP, March 2, 1899, bk. 54:110.

35. A journalist covering the fair made just this point a few years later. See the *Des Moines Register and Leader* (August 31, 1906), 3.

36. Articles in the *Burlington Hawkeye* and *Marshalltown Times-Republican* (February 10, 1899). Cumming scrapbook, Iowa Art Guild, Des Moines, 13.

37. Schoenhut had been the show's judge for several years. See ISAS president G. H. Van Houten to Alice Louise Burton, September 11, 1899, ISAS papers, AD V, bk. 54:588-89.

38. "Art Quotations Go Down," *Des Moines Leader* (August 25, 1899), 2.

39. *Des Moines Leader* (August 26, 1899), 1. How this sudden rapprochement was reached is not clear.

40. Iowa Yearbook of Agriculture 15(1914): 7, 31; *Greater Iowa*, (May 1914), 8. See also the unflattering report of T. C. Legoe, director of the Fine Arts Department, to the State Board of Agriculture in 1909. Iowa Yearbook of Agriculture 10(1909): 276-77.

41. *Des Moines Register and Leader* (September 1, 1914), 7. *Greater Iowa* (May 1914), 8; (August 1914), 5.

42. Iowa State Board of Agriculture, *Official Catalog* (1916): 23.

43. *Greater Iowa* (May 1914), 6.

44. See "The Iowa Art Guild," and other articles in "Iowa Artists" scrapbook, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

45. *Ibid.*

46. See Cumming's inflammatory, anti-Semitic letter to University of Iowa President W. A. Jessup, May 22, 1924. Charles Atherton Cumming papers, Department of Special Collections, University of Iowa Library. Quoted with permission.

47. *Des Moines Register* (August 27, 1925), 1; (August 28, 1925), 7. Cumming's dismissal of Mrs. Greenman was, of course, highly controversial. For a defense of his actions, see Lewis Worthington Smith's newspaper editorial, "Judgment in Art," in Ferguson, *et al.*, *Charles Atherton Cumming*, 46. Smith, a renowned professor of literature at Drake University in Des Moines, was among Cumming's longtime friends and supporters.

48. *Des Moines Register* (September 4, 1925), 18.

49. *Ibid.*

50. Cumming did author a short pamphlet, titled "A Defense of the White Man's Art," which was to serve as a blueprint for a much longer work. Charles Atherton Cumming papers, Department of Manuscripts, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines. See also Cumming to Benjamin F. Shambaugh, June 30, 1928. Charles Atherton Cumming papers, Department of Special Collections, University of Iowa Library. In 1932 Cumming returned to Iowa, where he died shortly after his arrival. His obituaries may be found in both the *Des Moines Register* and *Des Moines Tribune*, (February 18, 1932).

51. *Greater Iowa* (July 1927), 7.

52. For two differing accounts of Wood's conversion to regionalism, see James Dennis, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture* (New York, 1975); and Wanda Corn, *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision* (New Haven, 1983): 25-33. Other accounts of Wood's career include Hazel E. Brown: *Grant Wood and Marvin Cone: Artists of an Era* (Ames, Iowa, 1972); Joseph S. Czestochowski, *John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood: A Portrait of Rural America* (Columbia, Mo., 1981); Darrell Garwood, *Artist in Iowa: A Life of Grant Wood* (New York, 1944; reprint, Westport, Conn., 1971); Joan Liffing-Zug, ed., *This is Grant Wood Country* (Davenport, 1977). See also Shortridge, *The Middle West*, 57-65, 99-104.

53. Wood exhibited "Dinner for Threshers" at the fair in 1933; the following year, he included some of his own works in an exhibit of paintings completed under the Public Works of Art Project, of which he was the director in Iowa.

54. On the Stone City colony, see Corn, *Grant Wood*, 38-43; Dennis, *Grant Wood*, 195; Grant Wood, "Aim of the Colony," in "Stone City" pamphlet (1933). Iowa Artists scrapbook, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines; Frederick A. Whiting, Jr., "Stone, Steel, and Fire: Stone City Comes to Life," *American Magazine of Art* 25(1932): 333-42.

55. At the risk of being accused of relegating women to a footnote, a word is in order here about heavy-handedness of another kind. Following on the heels of Cumming's longstanding domination

of Iowa painting, the reign of Wood and his regionalist followers suggests that, while the majority of Iowa's painters might still be women, those in control of the state's artistic circles were almost uniformly men. It seems likely that the "professionalization" of the fair's art exhibit was attended by a denigration of women's artwork, but this is only a hypothesis. On the one hand, women could be found studying and teaching at both the Cumming School of Art and at Stone City. On the other, regionalist depictions of midwestern farm life tend to suggest that farming is essentially the "man's work" of tending to crops and livestock, while neglecting the indispensable contributions of women and children to the farm economy. But exploring these claims would take us far afield from the central argument here, and will have to wait for another day, another paper, and perhaps even another author.

56. Grant Wood, "Revolt Against the City" (Iowa City, 1935), reprinted in Dennis, *Grant Wood*, 229-35. Mott's authorship of the essay is discussed in Corn, *Grant Wood*, 46, 153.

57. Wood, "Revolt Against the City," reprinted in Dennis, *Grant Wood*, 231.

58. On these aspects of Wood's work, see Dennis, *Grant Wood*, esp. 67-68, 197.

59. As James Dennis notes, "the term 'regionalism' knows no equal for ambiguity," or for the headaches it has given art historians. Dennis, *Grant Wood*, 143.

60. For an introduction to this extensive debate, the place to begin is Mary Scholz Guedon, *Regionalist Art: A Guide to the Literature* (Metuchen, N.J., 1982). Craven published several paens to regionalism, including his *Modern Art*, (New York, 1934), esp. 260-72, 320-31; and *Men of Art*, (New York, 1934), 506-13. Davis's broadside appeared in *Art Front* (February 1935), and is reprinted in Diane Kelder, ed., *Stuart Davis*, (New York, 1971), 151-54.

61. Dornbusch won the prize with "The Road Ahead;" Pyle for "Sunday Morning." *Des Moines Register* (August 24, 1933), 1A; "State Fair Art—Indigenous Fertility," *American Magazine of Art* 26(1933): 476-77.

62. *Des Moines Register* (August 22, 1934), 1, 6.

63. See the *Des Moines Register* (August 22, 1934), 6; (August 18, 1935), sec. 6:2; (August 21, 1935), 1; see also *Greater Iowa* (July 1935), 3.

64. *Des Moines Register* (August 21, 1935), 1. See also Joseph S. Czestochowski, *Marvin Cone: An American Tradition* (New York, 1985).

65. Iowa State Fair Board, *Premium List* (1935): 185; *Greater Iowa* (July 1935), 3.

66. *Des Moines Register* (September 1, 1935), 1L; See also *Greater Iowa* (July 1935), 3.

67. *Des Moines Register* (August 22, 1935), 3.

68. The union suggested a fee of one percent of a work's purchase price per day. *Des Moines Register* (August 26, 1936), 7; (August 30, 1936), 7-L. See also (August 25, 1937), 1A.

69. See Lea Rosson DeLong and Gregg R. Narber, *A Catalog of New Deal Mural Projects in Iowa* (Des Moines, 1982): 10-13. Much has been written on the similarities and differences between regionalism and Social Realism. The best place to begin is Matthew Baigell, *The American Scene: American Painting of the 1930s* (New York, 1974), 55-73, 74. Evidence of the serious rift within Iowa regionalism provoked by Wood's domination of the movement may be found in the correspondence of Holger Cahill and Francis Robert White in 1936. Archives of American Art, WPA, Record Group 69, reel DC 76, frame 657, and reel DC 61, frames 259-262, 264 and 302.

70. *Des Moines Register* (August 26, 1936), 7.

71. *Des Moines Register* (August 25, 1937), 1A.

72. *Wallace's Farmer*, quoted in *Greater Iowa* (October 1937), 4.

73. Telephone conversation with the author, December 14, 1988.

74. *Des Moines Register* (August 24, 1938), 1.

75. *Wallace's Farmer*, quoted in Iowa State Fair Board, *Annual Report* 16 (1938): 18.

76. Rhodes and Johnson each painted half of this mural, with Rhodes executing the earlier years of Iowa's history and Johnson the more recent decades. For details concerning this commission, see Francis Robert White to D. S. Defenbacher, Archives of American Art, WPA, Record Group 69, reel DC 76, frames 1046-7; FRW to Thomas G. Parker, August 17, 1938, frames 1159-60.

77. "Index Publicity," (May 3, 1939): 2. Iowa, WPA, Professional and Service Division, Scrapbook, vol. 2. Department of Special Collections, Iowa State University.

78. For two engaging examinations of the response of ordinary Americans to regionalist painting, see Marling, *Wall-to Wall America*, and M. Sue Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism: John Steuart Curry and the Kansas Mural Controversy* (Washington, D.C., 1986). A broader treatment of popular dislike for "modern" art may be found in Jose Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art* (Princeton, 1948), 5-6, 8-14.

79. *Des Moines Register* (August 24, 1938), 1. Rhodes himself later recalled that the WPA was administered so as to guarantee "the artist's right to unfettered expression." See DeLong and Narber, *Catalog*, 15. Belisario Contreras has observed that the WPA art program was less centralized, and so less authoritarian, than the PWAP had been. Belisario Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art* (Lewisburg, Penn., 1983), 150-51, 183-84. For an engaging analysis of the popular response to New Deal murals, see Karal Ann Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America* (Minneapolis, 1982). Marling notes the virtual obsession with uncovering the slightest hint of leftist political symbolism in New Deal murals (p. 48). See also Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (Philadelphia, 1984).

80. *Wallace's Farmer* 63(September 10, 1938), 592.
81. Notably, George Dixon of Keokuk quoted approvingly Webster's remark in his address before the inaugural fair in 1854. See ISAS, *Report* 1(1854): 28.
82. *Des Moines Register* (August 24, 1939), 3.
83. *Des Moines Register* (August 23, 1939), 3; (August 21, 1940), 1.
84. Eventually, he moved to California, where he became a ceramicist of world renown, remaining productive until his death in 1989.
85. Gebers, a part-time school teacher, had studied under Wood at Stone City, and chaired the art division of the Iowa Federation of Women's Clubs.
86. Elizabeth Wherry, "Iowa Art Is Never Tiresome," *Wallace's Farmer* 66 (September 6, 1941): 576.
87. Coincidentally, Grant Wood himself died in February 1942. For an exploration of the demise of regionalism and advent of abstract expressionism, see Doss, *Benton, Pollock and the Politics of Modernism*, esp. chaps. 4-5.
88. *Des Moines Register* (June 25, 1946), 1.
89. *Des Moines Register* (June 25, 1946), 1.
90. Lewis Mumford makes a similar point in *Technics and Civilization* (New York, 1934): 293-95.