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Historical Survey

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Historical Survey

With the rise of cultural regionalism in the twentieth century, Iowa along with the rest of the Midwest became increasingly conscious of local talent. In literature this idea took shape in such publications as John T. Frederick's *The Midland*. In art it produced such painters as Grant Wood. Synonymously with this growing awareness that art was not for eastern cities only, another idea developed: that art is not alone something for a few painters who can afford it or are lucky enough to have a patron. By now it is understood that art is for everyone the creative expression of life around them.

It is this new conception of art as something not to be set off by itself that has led to the creation of art centers in Iowa. In the classes at these centers children of six, eight, or ten, and retired businessmen of sixty-five have an equally good time. They have learned that pictures are not only to be looked at in some metropolitan museum during a spare half-hour between trains, but also some-

thing which they themselves can paint, just as they can learn ceramics, metal work, weaving, and other crafts. Iowans have learned to use their hands for more than whittling, and as they learned, art has become a part of Iowa culture.

An important part of this development is a new definition of an art center and its place in community life. There was a time when rural areas and small urban communities such as are found in Iowa had few opportunities to study and enjoy the visual arts. It was, in fact, one of the weak spots in American culture. Since then the art center has been recognized as indispensable to a well-rounded community cultural program—just as indispensable as the public library. But this new cultural stature for art has come along with a change in the conception of an art center. It is no longer a place limited to passive visual participation in art exhibits. Now it includes an active study of crafts, techniques, and various art media, besides a program of classes, forums, demonstrations, and lectures. Eventually the application of art principles growing out of such a program will inevitably carry over into the home and the community. If one of the functions of fine arts is “to bring order and design into the visual aspects of the environment created by human society,” then art centers have a real function to perform for Iowa culture.

Some Iowa art centers go back nearly forty years. Dubuque, for example, except for an interval of two years during World War II, has been active since 1910. The Art Association there started with only ten members, which have increased to 125 in 1948. Even in those early years the Association managed to sponsor lectures by men from the Chicago Art Institute and the fine arts department of the State University, to send members to the Stone City artist's colony in 1932, and to conduct classes as well as five or six exhibits a season.

At times Dubuque had a paid director. Adrian Dornbush, for example, was, in the mid-1920's, the head of the "Little Institute" with a gallery in the old engine house on Locust Street. More recently a Junior Art Association was formed under the sponsorship of the Association. The Rt. Rev. Msgr. J. M. Wolfe later became the chairman and has conducted its activities for many years. Its aim is to encourage originality in art among school children, and an exhibition of student work is held every year.

As yet the Dubuque Art Association has no building of its own. Meetings are held in the art room of the Public Library where pictures belonging to the Association are hung and visiting exhibitions are shown. According to the current president, Mr. John Heeb, the aim of the Dubuque As-

sociation is "to develop a deeper appreciation of art, to bring worthwhile work to the locality for all the Public." To accomplish this, a six-month program has been arranged for 1948-1949 with exhibitions, lectures by experts, and a local artist's show from a tri-state area.

Not all Iowa art centers can be fully reported here and some will necessarily be described only briefly where there is a special reason for their continued support. Cedar Rapids and Cedar Falls, for example, have the proximity of art departments in Coe College and Iowa State Teachers College to stimulate art activities.

Cedar Rapids has had an art association, established in 1911, almost as long as Dubuque. Later the Little Gallery opened there under Edward B. Rowan in 1928 with funds from the Carnegie Foundation and was intended as an example for similar galleries in other towns of its size. For a period in the depression years (1932-1934) it was Grant Wood and the Stone City Colony which made the city art-conscious. Now both of these are gone and Cedar Rapids is dependent chiefly on the proximity of Marvin Cone on the staff at Coe College and a well-developed public school art program to keep alive this heritage.

The Cedar Falls Association on the other hand is fairly recent. It was established in 1940 and in

late fall of the following year it inaugurated the annual Northeastern Iowa Artists Exhibit in a gallery donated by the Nuhn family — Mrs. W. C. Nuhn, Ferner Nuhn, the writer, and Marjorie Nuhn, the artist. Its program includes classes as well as exhibits and an annual auction of original work by members.

Both these communities, however, receive special stimulation just as Iowa City does from the excellent department of fine arts at the State University and as Mt. Vernon does from the Armstrong Hall of Fine Arts at Cornell College. But whatever the impetus, art interest in Iowa has been growing steadily. For a period in the thirties and early forties WPA funds gave it a boost. Earlier, as in Davenport, special bequests from art patrons provided the initial focus.

Another example of a bequest that was responsible for a municipal art center is at Fort Dodge. There the Blanden Memorial Art Gallery, the gift of Charles G. Blanden, was opened in 1932. What was unusual about the bequest was that Mr. Blanden, a businessman, financier, and patron of the arts, had not lived in Fort Dodge for forty years. However, he maintained a continuous interest in the city where he had once (1887-1888) been mayor, and after the death of his wife, who had formerly taught school in Fort Dodge, he presented the money for the Gallery

as a memorial to her. The question of a site for the Gallery was solved by the heirs of the estate of Woolsey Welles, a pioneer settler in the area, who gave land for the building. The Gallery, designed by E. O. Damon, was officially opened June 5, 1932, with a triple exhibition of: (1) paintings owned by Fort Dodge residents, (2) paintings by former residents of the city, and (3) paintings by the current members of the Art Guild.

The Gallery is municipally-owned, with a board of trustees appointed by the Mayor. Open every Sunday afternoon, it also shows exhibitions sponsored by the Fort Dodge Federation of Arts, the Fort Dodge Art Guild, and the Camera Club. The exhibitions are still of both out-of-state and local artists. In the last two years exchange exhibits with Cedar Falls and Cedar Rapids have been arranged. A review of a year's activities indicates that the Blanden Gallery is an active force in the cultural life of Fort Dodge.

One of the most recent art centers is the Central Iowa Art Association at Marshalltown which was organized in 1946. For the first year classes and exhibits were held in the Public Library. Then the Marshall County Board of Supervisors permanently donated rooms on the third floor of the Courthouse. Now the Association has a 40-foot studio in addition to a large gallery for its monthly exhibitions. The rooms are open every

day with children's classes and oil and watercolor classes for adults taught by one permanent instructor and outside instructors from the State University, State Teachers College, the Des Moines Art Center, or Coe College. In 1946, the first year, the membership reached 300; by 1949 it had increased to 500.

A few Iowa art centers have an interesting enough history to warrant separate treatment and they will be discussed in the following articles. It is, however, evident from this brief survey that art has a definite place in Iowa culture. Initiated by a few individuals, given a brief shock-treatment by WPA funds in the late thirties, art has by now fully recovered from the letdown of World War II to take its place beside music and literature in the life of this State.

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