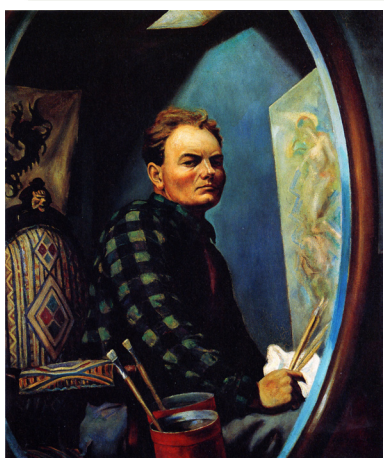


John Stuart Curry

a biography



John Stuart Curry was born on November 14, 1897. His parents farmed near Dunavant, Kansas, and he grew up helping tend the livestock and spent much of his time sketching the farm's horses. In 1916 he enrolled at the Kansas City Art Institute, moving a month later to Chicago to study at the School of the Art Institute before attending Geneva College in Pennsylvania. Curry moved to New Jersey to work with the renowned illustrator and artist Harvey Dunn. His illustrations appeared in such magazines as *Boy's Life* and the *Saturday Evening Post*. In 1924 Curry also exhibited at the National Academy of Design for the first time, although his work received little notice. Ready to move on to painting, Curry relocated that same year with his wife to Westport, Connecticut, a haven for many aspiring artists.

Curry traveled to Paris in 1926, a time when many American artists were drawn to controversial and abstract works by Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse. However, he was drawn to the grand narrative paintings of the Renaissance and Baroque eras, especially those of the Dutch master Peter Paul Rubens. Later adopting the style of these Old

Masters in his scenes of Kansas, Curry suggested that the state had a history that could rival that of Renaissance Italy or Flanders.

Curry became known for his narrative paintings of Midwest farm life in a style now known as American Regionalism. Refusing to sentimentalize their experience, he depicted heroic farmers and their struggle to make a living in the unforgiving and often dangerous prairie. His paintings do not depict specific events from Kansas' history but instead attempt to convey the shared hardships of living on the land. While many artists argued that the way a painter painted was more important than what they painted, Curry refused to distract the viewer from the subjects of his art.

In 1928 he exhibited his first major work, *Baptism in Kansas*, at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and caught the attention of some of New York's most important art patrons. The scene of a crowded baptism in the midst of the vast and empty Kansas prairie was exotic and fascinating to a northeastern public unaccustomed to the fervent and unorthodox religious faith of the Midwest. Despite his newfound fame, the Great Depression made it difficult for Curry to find enough patrons to provide financial success. Discouraged, the artist traveled with the Ringling Brothers Circus for several months in 1932, sketching the animals and performers. The following year he spent a few weeks teaching at Grant Wood's Stone City Art Colony in Iowa. The rise in popularity of Regionalist painting helped Curry find commissions, including a position in 1936 as

the nation's first artist-in-residence at the University of Wisconsin. Between 1937 and 1941, Curry worked on his most controversial commission, a series of murals for the Kansas State Capitol depicting the state's history. Frustrated by the difficulties of working with political figures, Curry left the murals unfinished and unsigned.

Like his fellow Regionalists Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton, Curry aligned with left-leaning politics of the era, although he was never involved with a particular faction. One of the dominant political issues was lynching, and Curry painted several works condemning the practice, including *Justice Defeating Mob Violence*, painted as part of the government's Federal Arts Project for the U.S. Department of Justice. In 1935, Curry also participated in an anti-lynching art exhibition organized by the NAACP titled *An Art Commentary on Lynching*.

Throughout his career, Curry struggled to find acceptance by his home state. His straight-forward depictions often represented some of the most infamous aspects of the state, such as tornadoes, plagues of locusts, poverty, and violence. Many Kansans felt he was singling out the ugliest moments in their history, and that he should paint a more optimistic view of the state. Believing that such a purely ideal depiction was false, Curry was never able to reconcile his differences with many of them, and his support largely came from the Northeast. As Abstraction became the dominant style in American art and the Regionalist movement fell from



John Stuart Curry, *Baptism in Kansas*, 1928, oil on canvas, 40 x 50 in. Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, Photograph © 1996. Whitney Museum of Art.

popularity, Curry's technical abilities were singled out for harsh criticism. Hurt by negative press and criticism, Curry never came to terms with his declining fame. Since his death in 1946, his work has received the respect and appreciation it deserves.

American Regionalism: Art and Experience

John Stuart Curry was one of the three prominent members of a loose collective of artists known as the American Regionalists. Along with Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton, Curry's populist style turned away from international developments in the art world in order to document the experiences of rural America. Through strong narrative images, the Regionalists emphasized certain aspects of country life: the harsh prairie environment, music, religion, and folk tales. Wood typically painted scenes of Iowa; Benton, Missouri; and Curry, Kansas. In the 1930s, Regionalism was a dominant artistic style in the United States. In 1934 Thomas Hart Benton was the first artist featured on the cover of *Time* magazine.

The rural subject matter that was the focus of Regionalist art was also a major factor in the downfall of the movement because of its similarity to the art Soviet leader Joseph Stalin used to promote Communism. During the Great Depression, Communist organizations were popular throughout the United States, and many looked favorably on Stalin's policies. The Regionalists were in fact opposed to Communist doctrine, but once broader public opinion turned against Stalin's brutal regime, they were unfairly seen as promoting the fascist point of view. Concurrently, abstraction, with its intent to eliminate any traces of narrative or subject in its art, was developing into a dominant movement in the United States after World War II. Regionalism came to be seen as conservative and quaint.



John Stuart Curry, *Our Good Earth*, 1940-41, oil and tempera on canvas, College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

The Kansas Mural Controversy

In 1937 the state of Kansas commissioned John Stuart Curry to paint a series of murals depicting its history for the state capitol building. The largest commission of his career would also prove to be the most controversial, angering both citizens and politicians. Curry organized his murals into three acts: *Tragic Prelude*, the settlement of Kansas; *Kansas Pastoral*, life on the plains; and the third unnamed and unfinished act, agricultural prosperity.

Tragic Prelude, the most heavily criticized, portrayed the anti-slavery militant John Brown, whom Curry saw as a significant figure in the state's history. Many critics felt Brown had no place in such a prominent mural. Curry wrote, "Kansas was the starting place for the war between North and South. You can't paint Kansas history without painting that. And you can't paint that without including John Brown."

Between 1854 and 58, Brown instigated the fight against pro-slavery forces throughout the state in a campaign so violent it became known as "Bleeding Kansas." Hoping to spark an armed slave revolt, Brown led an unsuccessful raid in 1859 on the town arsenal in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. He was captured and hung for treason. In the mural, Curry placed him in the center of an imagined conflict between pro- and anti-slavery forces. Nearly twice as large as the other figures, Brown towers over the bodies of two Union and Confederate soldiers, a reference to his role with the war. Arms outstretched, Brown holds a rifle and a Bible, while the background shows two of Kansas' most violent natural events, a rampant prairie wildfire and a raging tornado. The latter also resulted in criticism that Kansas was unfairly stereotyped as the "tornado state."



John Stuart Curry, *Tragic Prelude—John Brown*, 1937-42, Mural, Kansas Statehouse, oil and tempera on canvas, 11 ft., 6 in x 31 ft. (overall) Photograph courtesy Nathan Ham, Topeka, Kansas.

Reactions to Curry's murals reflected two viewpoints: those who applauded his honest representations of the harshness of Kansas life, and those who felt he should stick to scenes of the state's beauty, creating an uplifting and optimistic mural. Some even disparaged his depictions of farm animals, one farmer claiming Curry painted the curl of a pig's tail wrong, while a cattle rancher declared that the artist painted "a lump-jawed bull and the legs of his cows are all too long." This was harsh criticism for a man raised on a farm, and while Curry made corrections to his work, he defended their accuracy.

In order to fit his murals into the capitol's rotunda, Curry asked that a portion of Italian marble at the bottom of a wall be removed. The public opposed to the content of the murals pressured the legislature to deny his request. Outraged over the decision, Curry refused to sign the two finished acts, leaving the third incomplete.



John Stuart Curry, *Kansas Pastoral—The Unmortgaged Farm*, 1937-42, Mural, Kansas Statehouse, Topeka, oil and tempera on canvas, 11 ft. x 29 ft. (overall), Photograph courtesy Nathan Ham, Topeka, Kansas.

Lynching, unlawful execution carried out by a mob, rose during the 19th century after the Civil War. People of all races were frequently targeted by violent lynch mobs, often for crimes they did not commit. By the 1930s anti-lynching movements had shifted into the mainstream of American culture. John Stuart Curry created several works critical of the practice including Joslyn's *Manhunt* and later a mural for the U.S. Department of Justice titled *Justice Defeating Mob Violence*.

In 1935, the NAACP organized the art exhibition *An Art Commentary on Lynching*, inviting artists from across the country to participate. Curry submitted three works to the exhibition: *Manhunt*, and its companion piece, *The Fugitive* (both as a painting and a lithograph). *Manhunt* portrays the feverish energy of a lynch mob in pursuit of a fugitive. The white horse rears, eyes bulging with fear. The bloodhound eagerly stretches toward the wilderness seeking the fugitive's scent. Most of the figures are faceless, suggesting the anonymity of these persecutors who were rarely held accountable for their actions.

The Fugitive depicts an African American man hiding in terror from the mob. He stands high in the tree with outstretched arms recalling the Crucifixion, which may suggest the subject's virtuous nature. While four members of the lynch mob search for him in the background, two butterflies, a popular symbol of innocence in art, flutter in the foreground. Hung side by side, Curry's works reveal the horrifying experience of the fugitive fleeing from the insatiable violence of the unrelenting posse. Neither work depicts a specific event, rather they seek to capture the fear and the fury of such violence in Kansas.



John Stuart Curry, *The Fugitive*, 1934-36, oil on canvas, 38 x 36 in., Private Collection, Photograph courtesy Kennedy Galleries, Inc., New York.



John Stuart Curry

American, 1897-1946

Manhunt

1931

oil on canvas, 30 x 40 1/4 in.
Museum Purchase (1979.142)

Curry and the Circus

John Stuart Curry traveled with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus on a tour through Pennsylvania and New Jersey in 1932. He found circus performers, like dispossessed farmers, to be living on the margins of society. All aspects of circus life were recorded in his art, and Curry sensitively revealed the performers' complicated backstage personalities as well as their dramatic performances.

The nation's two most popular trapeze artists, brothers Alfredo and Lalo Codona, captured Curry's attention. Renowned for their incredible strength, Curry emphasized their muscular, highly trained bodies in his painting, *The Flying Codonas*. He depicts their most dramatic stunt from the perspective of the audience: Alfredo's famed triple somersault into the arms of Lalo, while the viewer gazes up into an intricate arrangement of bright lights, wires, and poles. Alfredo soars through the air, while Lalo swings up to catch him. The contrast between the curved form of Alfredo and the straight lines of Lalo's outstretched body portrays Curry's ability to convey intense drama and suspense, as well as his skill at creating multifaceted arrangements of shape and form.



John Stuart Curry, *The Flying Codonas*, 1932, tempera and oil on composition board, 36 x 30 in. Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Photograph © 1997. Whitney Museum of American Art.

Discussion Questions

What do you feel when looking at *Manhunt*?

What do you think is the narrative of the painting *Manhunt*?

How would you describe the art movement American Regionalism?

Why were Kansans not pleased with Curry's Kansas Statehouse Murals?

How do you feel about them?

If you were chosen to paint murals for your capitol building, what topics would you depict? Are they controversial or neutral? Why did you choose them?

Timeline

Featuring John Stuart Curry

1895

1897 John Stuart Curry is born on November 14 on a farm near Dunavant, Kansas.

1900

1903 The Wright Brothers successfully fly an airplane at Kitty Hawk, NC.

1903 The Great Train Robbery, considered the first narrative film, is shown in theaters.

1905

1905 The Special Theory of Relativity is formulated by Albert Einstein.

1909 The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is established in Springfield, Illinois.

1910

1912 The SS *Titanic* sinks in the Atlantic Ocean.

ca. 1913 Attends Winchester High School in Kansas, but leaves after his junior year to study art.

1915

1916 Works on the Missouri Pacific Railroad in summer and by fall studies at the School of Art Institute of Chicago.

1918 The Allies (France, Great Britain, Italy, Russia, and the U.S.) prevail in World War I.

1920

1920 Meets artist and illustrator Harvey Dunn in Tenafly, New Jersey.

1921 Starts to publish illustrations in magazines *Saturday Evening Post* and *Boy's Life*.

1925

1926 Travels to Paris to study under Russian artist Schoukaieff.

1928 Receives important attention by the New York Press, for his painting *Baptism in Kansas*.

1929 Travels back to Kansas and studies the destruction left by a tornado.

1929 The U.S. stock market crashes triggering the Great Depression.

1930

1932 Exhibits *The Flying Codonas* in Whitney Museum of American Art's *First Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting*.

1932 Amelia Earhart becomes the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic.

1935

1935 Exhibits *The Fugitive* and *Manhunt* in the exhibit *An Art Commentary on Lynching* in New York.

1936 Accepts the artist-in-residence position at the University of Wisconsin College of Agriculture.

1937 Commissioned to create murals for the Kansas Statehouse.

1939 Reveals designs for statehouse murals thus sparking fury from Kansans.

1940

1941 Learns that marble will not be removed so he may finish his statehouse murals; refuses to sign and finish the murals.

1941 The U.S. enters World War II after Japan bombs Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

1945

1945 World War II ends with the U.S. dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan.

1946 Dies of a heart attack in Madison, Wisconsin on August 29.

Detail: John Stuart Curry, *Kansas Cornfield*, 1933, oil on canvas, 60 x 38 1/4 in., The Roland P. Murdock Collection, Wichita Art Museum, Wichita, Kansas, Photograph © 1997. Wichita Art Museum



JOHN STEUART CURRY
AMERICAN, 1897-1946

MANHUNT
1931, OIL ON CANVAS

JOSLYN ART MUSEUM® OMAHA, NEBRASKA
Museum Purchase (1979.142)