

MINNESOTA: INSIDE AND OUT
Exploring 100 Years of Art in Minnesota
through the Rourke's Permanent Collection

Minnesota: Inside & Out is an exhibition drawn from the Rourke's Permanent Collection, celebrating more than a century of artmaking by Minnesota artists. The show's subtitle, *Inside & Out*, refers both to artists exploring Minnesota and its inhabitants as a geographic or cultural point of reflection and inspiration, and also to artists depicting other locales, near and far, grounded in reality or suggestive of other states of mind or possibilities of being. It also refers to artists who themselves may have been considered insiders or outsiders, either because of their gender, convictions, training or access relative to the artistic sphere.

OVER THERE

Artists Annie Stein and Alfred Dehn were both raised in rural Minnesota, and their fondness and fascination for the area as depicted in their work was a major presence throughout their careers.

Stein regularly depicted local scenes and events, such as in *Georgetown Flood*, while Dehn's rendering in paintings and prints of Minnesota's landscapes, and occasionally its denizens, reflected a loving, yet at times alternately idealized or ambivalent, representation.

The first works in the exhibition by pioneer artist Stein reflect a homegrown vision of an artist who both captures local Minnesota landscapes and reflects on the upheaval wrought by the First World War. Stein, as an artistically gifted but untrained artist tied to the traditionally female domestic sphere, and Dehn, as a draft-eligible male, were very differently impacted by the changes of the times.

As a popular song from the early 1900's, a catchy rallying cry and a wistful title for Stein's painting, the phrase "Over There" can be seen as referring to the complexities of Minnesota life under the international impact of the first World War.

In Stein's painting *Over There*, we see a woman gazing wistfully across the water, an ambiguously open portrait of someone the viewer could interpret alternately as pining over a dispatched soldier or pondering a wider world across the water, access to which would have been closed to a woman of her time and means.

Meanwhile, Dehn's loose, evocative watercolors evince a deep affection for the Minnesota landscape, with no sign of the strained environment he faced there when the community learned he had become a conscientious objector rather than fight as a soldier in WWI, and questioned his loyalties and that of his family. After the war, Dehn spent most of his time in Europe and New York, but Minnesota always retained a pride of place in his artistic output. He returned to Minnesota and his hometown of Waterville often, drawing inspiration from the local landscape.

CORRESPONDENCES

Exuberant in their artistic production as well as in their conveyance of ideas and impressions from their travels, the otherwise eclectically grouped artists here — William Perl, Jack Youngquist and Orland Rourke — all exemplify the art of correspondence. Their works emphasize the significance of place abroad and their ties to “home” and underscore the value they placed on insights newly gained through travel.

The Rourke's collection serendipitously includes the Minnesota correspondence-based works here which reveal Perl's forays into the exhilarating landscapes and lifestyle of the Western states, Rourke's regular use of collage and assemblage to relay internationally influenced critiques of ideas and culture, and Youngquist's impressions of London, done in a manner stylistically distinct from his more well-known paintings. Each of these artworks recalls the possibilities, joys and surprises lent to correspondence by distance and delay in an era so different from our now instantaneous, always connected digital correspondence culture.

REGIONALISM & INFLUENCE

Regionalism, a major school of American art, placed emphasis on realistically depicting the country's landscape and local imagery. It arose in the 1930s, partly as a response to the devastating effects of the Depression in the US and the country's need to rebuild its sense of self worth. One of Regionalism's main proponents, artist Grant Wood, would become a direct influence on the artistic production of this region.

The strength of our local and regional artistic output was and remains deeply influenced by our colleges and universities. The teachers' commitment to their own artistic practices in no way diminished their commitment to educating and mentoring new generations of artists.

This was certainly the case for painter and printmaker Cyrus Running, who founded the art program at Moorhead's Concordia College, where he mentored Charles Beck, Leroy Aasland, Abner Jonas and many others, leading not only by example but also encouragement. Running himself did undergraduate studies in Minnesota, but later went on to graduate studies in painting at Yale. He then transferred to the University of Iowa to study under Grant Wood, internalizing many of Wood's notions of regionalist art.

Running encouraged Beck to study at Iowa as well. Although Running's influence on Beck is most notable in Beck's well-known prints, here the Rourke also has the fortune to draw from its collection works that highlight a rarer side of Beck. Beck has said of his work that he favors a “happy medium” between quick oil sketches and large finished works, feeling that he starts to “tighten up and lose some freedom” in larger-scaled works. Here these small-scale works have some of the feel of sketches, in their loosely enthused ease, yet their sensuous hint of texture and luminous tones, along with their intimate scale, give them a sense of almost jewel-like preciousness and delight which is quite distinct from Beck's larger paintings and prints.

Also on view here are works from a similar period and style that highlight women artists in the collection, including Eldrid Running, Cyrus's wife and fellow art student at Yale in the 1930s, and also gifted painter Elizabeth Strand, who taught for many years at Concordia College.

CONTEMPORARY MEETS REGIONALISM

Regionalism's insistence on local subject matter is still present in this grouping of artworks from a more recent era. Yet the artists here represent a shift toward more formal and conceptual concerns beyond those of the regionalist ethos, and reflect the influence of the Postwar era's flourishing American and European stylistic schools of art practice.

James O'Rourke's wide engagement and skillful realization of numerous artistic styles is found in a common industrial scene, transformed by his geometric play with form and vividly hued palette. Bela Petheo's painting dating from the Vietnam War era subtly recalls the impact of war on the Minnesota region in a tranquil street scene infused with the quietly unsettling presence of a military truck in the foreground.

George Pfeiffer's prolific output includes forays into many different painting styles and genres. Here his simple yet bold graphics and use of color recall Matisse as well as later Color Field Painting styles. At the same time, Pfeiffer uniquely conveys the vigor and impact of Minnesota's dynamically hilly landscape.

Abner Jonas utilizes a local vernacular architecture—the fish house—fashioning geometric blocks of color and shading to create a multidimensional interpretation of a winter scene and in the process, reinvigorating the landscape tradition. Aaron Holz also explores aquatic imagery, but his painterly, large-scale diptych highlights and conveys a charged energy and dynamic sense of movement that challenges art historical traditions in which fish and game are rendered as still life. Finally Zhimin Guan's shimmering, intimately scaled *Moorhead Winter* draws the viewer in to a curving road, rich with argentined possibility, and reflects the excitement of a new generation of artists and viewers imaginatively conceiving of and reconceiving Minnesota, inside and out.

PORTRAITS

Adolf Dehn's three portraits of women range in styles from the caricature to the cartoon to the deeply reverent. His awkwardly stepping *Farmer's Daughter* sketches a stereotype of an uncultured rural girl. The farm woman feeding hogs is more of a socially satirical cartoon, with commentary that may show his frustration at the lack of attention given to artistic and intellectual ideas in a setting where one's energies are of necessity dedicated to farm work. Finally, a reflective portrait quite different in drawing style, with its sensitive rendering of line and mass, seems uniquely an attempt to represent and respect a true individual.

Jeff Weispfenning's painting *Gentleman Farmer* and Trygve Olson's print of a farm boy also reflect a type. However, each conveys it in a manner that comments on what the viewer embeds in the import of the iconic imagery itself. One notes a similarity in their pose, which is both formal and casual as they stand rigidly for their portrait, pushing one hand into a pocket, perhaps to cover their unease with this formal stance. These two relate via a shared sense of self-consciousness, even if Weispfenning's subject is dressed in his finery and the farm boy is perhaps dressed in his own version of Sunday best, with his button-down shirt under overalls.

The psychologically charged portraits and self-portraits of Leroy Aasland's *Man* and Jerry Rudquist's *Self Portrait with Hair* also suggest a reflection on how outward selves can capture, mask, construct or question interior states. Parish's woodcut portrait relays a resonating correspondence across forms: the rich grain of the woodcut format, the artist's hatch marks shading and shaping the portrait, and the represented wrinkles of the man's face dynamically enmeshing the physical manifestations of time, growth, and experience. Finally, Geri Burkhardt's foregrounded young swimmer afloat in a vastness of lake and sky imbues a psychological depth to the scene, calling to mind German Romanticist painting with its notions of the sublime and spiritual resonance of the natural world.

SCULPTURAL WORKS

Minnesota has been fertile ground, figuratively and literally, for a talented crop of artists working in ceramics and sculpture. The rich clay of Minnesota is master ceramicist Richard Bresnahan's primary medium and inspiration. Bresnahan has studied, explored and mastered traditional clay formats, including his realization of the Japanese-inspired *Cloud Painted Canister*. Similarly, Charles Halling's *Yellow Vase* is a paean to the full potential of the ceramic arts, creating a lush realization of volume, form and color in this sculptural work of great presence.

Similarly, Charles Beck, best known for his prints and paintings, became interested in collecting duck decoys and appreciating their form, eventually taking up the art of carving and painting them himself to craft a range of highly suggestive sculptural works. Gail Kendall's extruded *Teapot* re-envisioned the container's traditionally rounded form, creating a multifaceted neo-cubist object with rich artistic resonance that is nonetheless conceived of as a functional object.

Both Matthew Holz and Joel Hegerle, through playful assemblages, explore mass, line and light as it can be uniquely realized and relayed in three dimensions, while representing some of Minnesota's fine population from the animal realm.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Minnesota has given rise to a number of uniquely distinctive photographers. Whether working in a documentary tradition, offering sharp or wry commentary, or subtly conveying the tone and tenor of a more intimate scene, the photographs here speak uniquely of Plains experiences or relay scenes that speak potently to experiences

abroad. Some photographers use the strengths of the black and white tradition, deftly registering and relaying tones of meaning in shades of gray, while others vividly utilize color that punctuates and underscores elements of a captured scene.

Deb Wallwork's large-scale photo collage *Crux* is resonant in its format and imagery, with photos taken from slightly different vantage points collaged together, underscoring how photography captures but a limited portion or aspect of a scene. In the image the startling bloodiness of the lower section belies the placidness of the snowy winter image above, leaving one to wonder what the true "crux" of the scene may be.

Todd Strand's photo from a documentary series taken in the 1970s is quietly powerful as it relays the new reality for a presumably deconsecrated church--as a storage site for hay bales—but it also calls into question the distinction between profane and sacred. It offers a pointed contrast to Fred Scheel's elegant architectural photograph, which reveals the artistry of a classical European cathedral's design and the significance of light in both photography and architecture, while Keri Pickett captures the sculptural presence of a hay stack—again resonating with the former Strand photo--in a multidimensional rural portrait.

Issues of representation course through the subsequent grouping of works, beginning with Daniel's striking color photo of a group of miners showering after a shift. The stark whiteness of the fully-lathered miner is both a haunting presence and a surprise representation of miners usually seen in coal-covered darkness, highlighting how, light or dark, their individuality is so often obscured by the gritty residue of their labor. Griffith's *Only a White Man* captures a moment from a televised film, wryly underscoring how projections of power and stereotype abound, while Keri Pickett's photo of a Native American domestic scene both reveals the voyeuristic aspect of photography and inverts it by showing the capturer and the captured on both sides of the lens. Similarly, McDaniels' portrait of a man draped in the American flag, his hands raised to his eyes, is a mixed gesture that can alternately suggest hands as viewfinders or hands that block sight, questioning issues of viewpoint, insight and power.

The final grouping of photographs here underscores the quietly potent power of place. Solinger's subtle imagery of formidable presence lost in the forest and Wallwork's resonant imagery of the flow—of water, nature and experience—reveal how photography relays much more than what is merely in front of a lens.