Heart of the Nation Moves to the Museum

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The Missouri: Heart of the Nation collection of ninety-eight paintings has moved from the walls of Jesse Hall to its new home at the Museum of Art and Archaeology. The collection was commissioned by the Scruggs-Vandervoort-Barney, Inc. department store of St. Louis, Missouri, in 1946 and donated to the University of Missouri in 1950. When the collection was housed in Jesse Hall, few viewers were aware that each painting was part of a collection. Why was the collection commissioned by a department store? Who were the artists? How did the collection end up at the University? And most importantly, what overall picture did the collection paint?

Searching to broaden the economic base for art, Reeves Lewenthal, head of Associated American Artists (AAA), approached Frank M. Mayfield, president of the St. Louis department store, Scruggs-Vandervoort-Barney, Inc. (SVB), and proposed a collaborative project. AAA worked with Mayfield and the public relations director, Mary Gamble, to commission a collection of almost 100 paintings depicting contemporary Missouri. The timing was propitious: SVB would soon be celebrating the 100th anniversary of their founding in 1850, and Missouri’s favorite son, Harry Truman, had become soon be celebrating the 100th anniversary of their founding in 2014.

The Heart of the Nation paintings were commissioned at a time when the general feeling among art and business observers was that fine art and commercial art were merging. The broker in that merger was Reeves Lewenthal and Associated American Artists, which he founded in 1934. Lewenthal merged the world of American art with that of middle-class consumerism, by selling art using the modern business practices of production (buying plates, producing prints, commissioning art) and distribution (through department stores, mail order, and his own gallery.) The prints were advertised as “signed originals by American great artists, one price $5.” Sales boomed by 1941. AAA was “the largest commercial art gallery in the world,” a $500,000-a-year business ($8.8 million-a-year in 2014 dollars) with 30,000 square feet of gallery space on Fifth Avenue in New York City. AAA marketed modern American art as a middle-class commodity and a vehicle for corporate publicity.

Nation collection is the only one that wasn’t disassembled and scattered to the winds.

Charles van Ravenswaay, then director of the State Historical Society of Missouri, described Missouri in his introduction to the catalog as the geographic center of the continent, where four mighty rivers meet the mightiest river of all, and therefore also the center of transportation and commerce. Featured prominently on the second page of the catalog is the painting by Lawrence Beall Smith of the bronze sculpture The Meeting of the Rivers. Even in the painting featured on the cover, A Fine Day in Missouri by Adolf Dehn, one can’t miss the forward progress of a freight train cutting through the pastoral farmland scene of a fine day in Missouri. Representing “the strength” of Missouri that Mayfield spoke of in his introduction, the subjects include Monsanto Chemical Company, Union Station in St. Louis, lead and zinc mining in Joplin, Bagnell Dam, Anheuser-Busch, the Kansas City stockyard, and the Mississippi River. Other paintings counter this, showing the “charm” and “beauty” of farms, the Missouri Botanical Garden, Jones and mules, Swamp Zoo Park, Mark Twain’s house, the state fair, and Kansas City’s Country Club Plaza. All identify commercial enterprise with Missouri living, Mayfield’s second purpose for the commissioning the collection of art.

The artists chosen by AAA for the project were among America’s premier and best known. The initial roster of ten artists included: Howard Baer, Thomas Hart Benton, Aaron Bohrod, Nicolai Cikovsky, Adolph Dehn, Ernest Fiene, Peter Hurd, Fletcher Martin, Georges Schrieber, and Lawrence Beall Smith. Although Benton was in the original line-up, he withdrew. Five Missouri artists replaced Benton: Fred Conway, Fred Shane, and three former students of Benton’s: Wallace Horden Smith, Frederic James, and Jackson Lee Nesbitt. All of the artists were educated in elite art academies in the U.S. and/or abroad. Eight of the fourteen had just returned from work as artist-war correspondents from the many theaters of WWII, employed by commercial enterprises such as Life Magazine and Abbott Laboratories. Each artist was assigned general areas and topics in the state with great latitude for specifics in execution. Artists made field notes and sketches, returning home to complete their paintings in their studios. Studios for seven of the fourteen artists were located in New York City.

The collection premiered at the AAA galleries on Fifth Avenue in New York City and then toured from August 1947 through December 1949, opening first at the City Art Museum in St. Louis. Along with art museums other venues included colleges and universities, clubs, and a department store, for a total of nineteen venues in Missouri, Illinois, and Kansas. Addressing the eventual need to find a permanent home for the collection, several officials at SVB argued it should be dispersed, but Shane, one of the artists and a professor of art at the University of Missouri worked to secure the entire collection for MU. He enlisted the help of Elmer Ellis, then dean of the College of Arts and Science. Ellis argued persuasively to Mary Gamble, who went to bat for the University in discussions at SVB. University President Frederick A. Middlesbush accepted the collection on behalf of the University at a ceremony in 1950 at the Hotel Statler in St. Louis.

For sixty-four years, the paintings in the Missouri: Heart of the Nation collection hung in the halls and offices of Jesse Hall, which posed challenges for their conservation and security. Visitors to Jesse Hall may have noticed some of the paintings, and successive administrators may have moved their favorites into and out of their offices, but through this author’s research, it is clear that the paintings are not well known to scholars, since little has been written on the collection as a whole or on individual paintings. By moving to the Museum of Art and Archaeology, the paintings can join the oeuvres of each of the artists. Students and scholars can research and write about the paintings within the context of history, and the visiting public can contemplate and enjoy the paintings within the shifting kaleidoscope of future exhibitions at the Museum.