

LOOKING BACK TO LOOK FORWARD

75 YEARS OF THE WISCONSIN REGIONAL ARTS PROGRAM 1940–2015

BY HELEN KLEBESADEL

In terms of American Democracy, the arts are for everyone. They are not reserved for the wealthy, or for the well-endowed museum, the gallery, or the ever-subsidized regional professional theater. As America emerges into a different understanding of her strength, it becomes clear that her strength is in the people and the places where people live. The people, if shown the way, can create art in and of themselves.

—Robert E. Gard, from *The Arts in the Small Community: A National Plan* (1966)

The Wisconsin Regional Art Program (WRAP) has been changing lives since 1940. With the celebration of WRAP's 75th anniversary in 2015 we have the opportunity to reflect upon how a program designed to serve Wisconsin's non-professional artists during the Depression continues to serve a vital need in our state today.

Founded in 1936 by the UW–Madison College of Agriculture, the Regional Arts Program began as an innovative experiment to use the arts to expand the cultural growth and knowledge of rural Wisconsin. Drawing on Progressive values of egalitarianism and education for all, rural sociologist John Rector Barton and

Dean of the College of Agriculture Chris L. Christensen developed the Regional Art Program with service to Wisconsin's rural communities in mind. The two envisioned an expanded role for the college that went beyond bringing technical skills to farmers and into more arts and cultural opportunities for Wisconsinites living in and around rural communities. Inspired by the Danish Folk School movement that linked cultural and arts education for rural people to the development of Scandinavia's emerging democracies, Barton and Christensen hoped the Regional Art Program would serve a similar unmet need for broad-based humanities education here in Wisconsin.

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Joan Arend (Kirkbush), *Wisconsin Farm Auction*, 1945. Oil on canvas.



Iris Furman Tellefson, *Feeding Time*, c. 1942. Oil on canvas.

The 1930s were full of hardship for rural populations in Wisconsin. Most farms lacked electricity, and World War II had not yet pulled the nation out of the Great Depression. Parents and children alike put in hard work and long hours only to barely get by. Industrialization was sweeping the globe, yet in Wisconsin there was a cultural and economic chasm between urban and rural areas that only grew during the ensuing decade.

Isolation and a nose-to-the-grindstone ethos meant little to no access to the arts for most rural communities. During the 1930s and 1940s most country schools were small, one-room affairs with a single teacher responsible for covering every subject. Instruction in art appreciation or the visual arts was viewed as frivolous or deemed an unworthy pursuit by overburdened educators and administrators. As a result of these and other contributing factors, few children growing up in rural Wisconsin before the 1950s were given a systematic, sustained art education.

This began to change in 1936 when well-known Regionalist painter John Steuart Curry was hired to be the first artist-in-residence in the UW–Madison School of Agriculture. In a bold vision for rural arts education, Barton and Christensen installed Curry at the university as a resource for the people of the state. However, as the first artist-in-residence at an American university, there was no specific organized plan for Curry to follow. But his belief that “the artist must paint the thing that is most alive to him” was enough to move Curry in the right direction. He began offering art presentations and generally making himself available to anyone who wished to see him. Embracing the Wisconsin Idea, Curry spent much of the next few years visiting the countryside and encouraging self-taught artists to draw upon their own lives for subject matter.

Inspired by the 1939 American Country Life Conference exhibition of professional artists addressing rural themes, Dean Christensen, Professor Barton, and others encouraged Curry to pursue an exhibition of original artworks by Wisconsin rural artists who had not been formally trained. A three-month effort connected Curry to amateur artists across the state and resulted in the curated selection of artists from 17 counties for the first WRAP exhibition of Wisconsin artists in 1940. For those original thirty artists whose work was hung on the walls of the UW–Madison Memorial Union, the exhibition had lasting significance and was a source of deep encouragement of their creative expression.

From these early efforts grew an ongoing outreach network of locally sponsored art workshops and exhibits, with Curry bringing supportive critique to artists and selecting participants for an annual state exhibition out of which some works would be purchased for WRAP’s permanent collection.

On occasion Curry would discover artists on his own, like fourteen-year-old Lois Ireland (Waunakee) who was exhibiting her work in a local eatery he frequented. People would also bring talented individuals to his attention, like Clarence Boyce Monegar (also known as Red Arrow), a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation from Shawano County. Monegar’s drawings composed during a brief stint in the county jail so impressed a local court official that he paroled him and personally drove him to Curry’s studio. After a short period of study with Curry to learn lithog-

raphy and refine his craft, Monegar began making and selling art, launching a life-long art career. Today Monegar’s drawings and prints are highly collectable.

These early works—many of which are still in WRAP’s permanent collection—demonstrate how a piece of art can be a history lesson, an historical record, a preservation of culture, and an autobiography all in one. The works remaining in the collection today document events and experiences that provide us with a richer understanding of Wisconsin history while underscoring the vital importance of rural life in our state.

Then, as today, the annual WRAP exhibition most benefitted the self-taught and artists with limited formal training. The prospect of sharing their works with a statewide audience was exciting to these unknown artists, and the number taking part in the annual Rural Art Show grew rapidly: between 1940 and 1947 the roster of exhibitors swelled from 30 to 105 artists from across the state. What is now the annual State Day Conference and awards ceremony started as the Rural Art Luncheon, an occasion for celebration and mutual encouragement but also a cherished interlude from lives spent in the field or at a wood-fired kitchen stove.

After his too early death, Curry was succeeded by the painter Aaron Bohrod as the next artist-in-residence at UW–Madison in 1948. (I was one of the rural children whose future art making was influenced by this program when students from my rural school toured his studio, saw his amazing work, and met the artist). A Midwestern artist like Curry, Bohrod became well known during World War II as an artist-correspondent for *Life* magazine. Bohrod continued Curry’s tradition of outreach to Wisconsin artists, discovering and encouraging such artists as wood turner Harry Nohr. Nohr developed the hobby of wood-turning while working as postmaster in Mineral Point. Exceptionally beautiful and creative, Nohr’s hand-crafted wood bowls earned national and international recognition and were included in a Smithsonian touring exhibit.

Bohrod worked well with rural artists and the Rural Arts Program continued to flourish with the addition of James Schwalbach to the College of Agriculture’s Department of Rural Sociology staff in 1945. Harnessing the power of radio to deliver art instruction to hundreds of classrooms and rural schools, Schwalbach was the driving force behind “Let’s Draw,” a series on the Wisconsin University School of the Air. Airing until 1973, Schwalbach’s series was instrumental in bringing public art instruction to elementary classrooms across the state.

Over the years, many Wisconsin communities developed local or regional art shows and organizations with the assistance of Rural Art Program staff. By 1954 some rural artists were ready to go beyond the loose organization of regional and state exhibitions. Several long-time exhibitors proposed the formation of the Wisconsin Rural Artists’ Association (WRAA), which was committed to encouraging non-professional artists, especially those involved with WRAP.

WRAA went on to become an active force in developing art activities throughout the state. Rural Art Program staff members John Barton and Jim Schwalbach and artist-in-residence Aaron Bohrod served in an advisory capacity to WRAA, providing important links between artists and helping organize meetings and workshops. The association developed and published a quarterly newsletter



Arthur Johnson, *Peaceful Valley*, 1944. Oil on canvas.

Working on farms and as a truck driver, Arthur Johnson found art training where he could from traveling teachers and correspondence courses. He sold his first oil painting for fifty cents in 1912 and entered his first painting in a WRAP exhibition in 1941. Working from the Monroe area, his local reputation grew. Johnson showed and sold his art regularly in the 1940s. Several of his works were purchased for the WRAP Permanent Collection.



Lois Ireland, *Morning Glory*, 1948. Oil on canvas, 30% x 35¼ inches.

*Waukegan artist Lois Ireland exhibited 23 paintings through the Rural Arts Program between 1943 and 1948, starting when she was just 14 years old. She studied art but abandoned her career to focus on family. She again picked up her brushes in the 1970s. Now 86 and living in Minneapolis, Ireland is still making art and her work was featured in a recent solo exhibition, *Lois Ireland: Wisconsin Pastorale*, at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art.*

called *Contour Notes* in which members exchanged news of local art events and shared tips and techniques. Even though WRAA changed its name to the Wisconsin Regional Artists' Association during the 1960s, it remains today an active statewide organization in support of Wisconsin's rural artists.

The concept of an agricultural college developing an arts- and culture-based outreach program seems daring today, especially at a time when massive cuts to the arts and public education are commonplace. Yet the success of the Rural Art Program is an enduring example of how educational innovation can transcend the cultural differences and politics of the moment. The program had its modest beginnings in 1936, a year when jobs and hard cash were scarce, and began cultivating promising, as-yet-undeveloped talent across the state during an economic downturn. WRAP flourished in underserved and remote areas of the state precisely because rural residents felt cut off from the cultural and academic institutions found in the cities.

Then as now art offered a reason to come together and share in an experience. But the program also provided a window to a brighter future, stimulating creativity among amateur artists in small towns and on remote farms across the state as well as nurturing professional careers through educational workshops, awards programs, and local and state group exhibitions.

The energy and enthusiasm of Curry's successor, Aaron Bohrod, and subsequent WRAP directors James Schwabach, Ken Kuemmerlein, and Leslee Nelson, along with the ongoing support of the Wisconsin Regional Artists Association, have for 75 years ensured that WRAP exhibitions and workshops continue to be cornerstone activities for nonprofessional artists throughout the state.

WRAP's administrative location has bounced around during this time from the School of Agriculture, to UW Extension, to the UW-Madison Division of Continuing Studies, which is now its home. For years UW-Madison subsidized this vision for the Wisconsin Idea manifested in the visual arts across the state. With recent and ongoing cuts to the University of Wisconsin System budget, WRAP is increasingly reliant upon participant fees and fundraising to support its programming and administrative costs.

Today, the organization receives countless volunteer hours from WRAA members and the 25 exhibition coordinators, art organizations, and venues across the state that co-sponsor WRAP exhibitions and educational workshops. Collectively there are as many as 900 entries of two- and three-dimensional art in any media appearing in local WRAP exhibitions, which lead up to the annual WRAP State Exhibition and State Day Conference. This annual event includes a two-month exhibition of twenty award-winning WRAP artworks and concludes with a much-anticipated conference, luncheon, and awards ceremony, during which \$4,000 is provided to artists whose work is selected by a professional artist juror.

Through the years, thousands of Wisconsin artists have participated in WRAP, which had expanded to include urban areas by the 1960s. With the ongoing reductions in support for arts education in our schools the need is almost as great now as it was when the program started to provide arts-based growth opportunities for students and adults alike.

While many WRAP participants are interested in personal growth and transformation through the arts, a few work excep-



Walter Thorp, *Covey of Quails*, c. 1941. Crayon and pencil.



Ambrose G. Ammel, *Widgeon and Gadwall*, c. 1948. Oil painting.



Clarence Boyce Monegar, *The Watering Hole*, c. 1942. Watercolor.

tionally hard at building local community engagement through the arts groups and organizations that support their hometown WRAP workshops and exhibitions.

Some participants who may have had their first experiences of public recognition in WRAP exhibitions have gone on to develop professional reputations and careers. Most notable among early WRAP participants are Harry Nohr, Lois Ireland Zwettler, Clarence Boyce Monegar, and Almond resident Joan Arend.

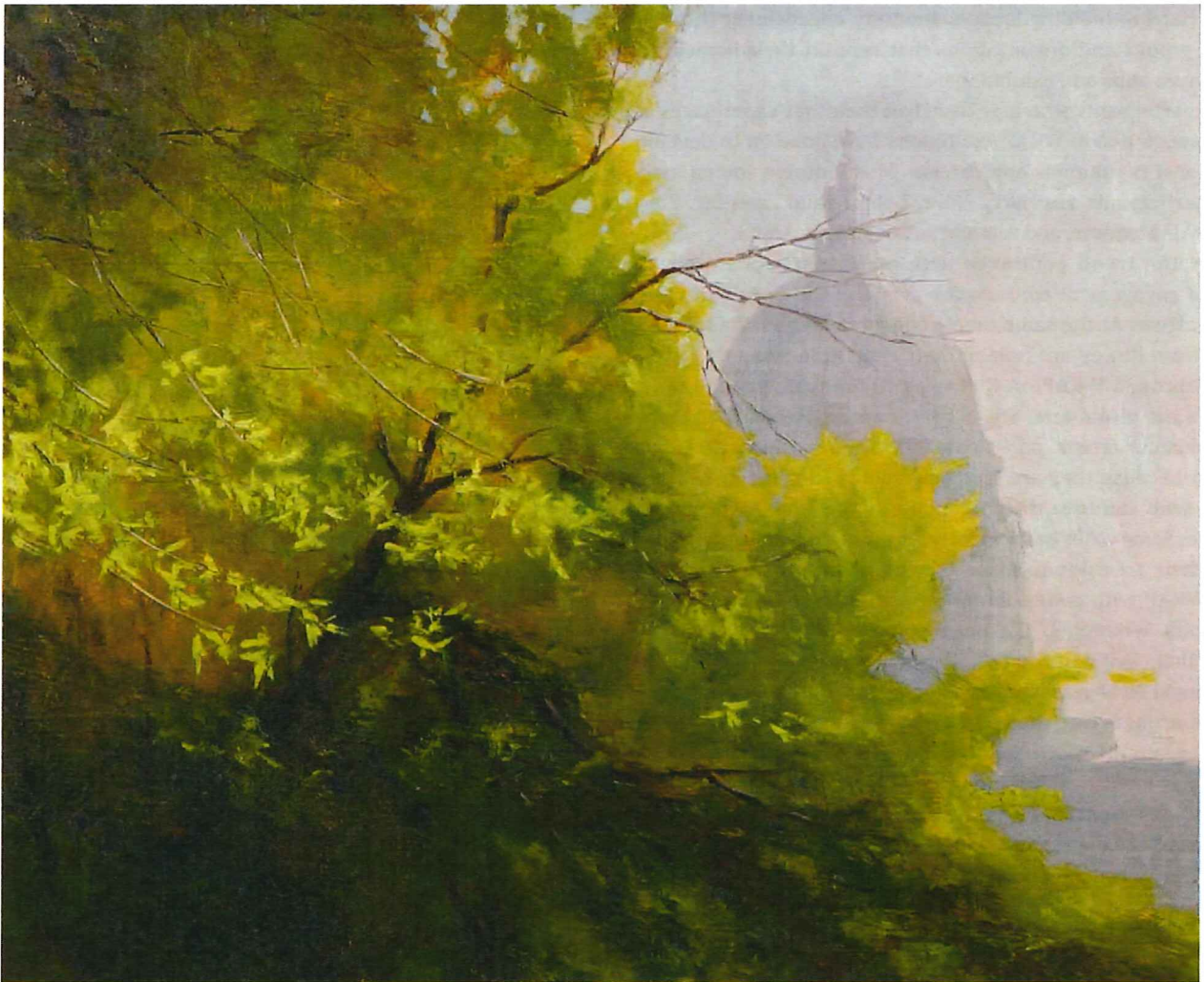
Today the trend continues with mature artists exploring personal engagement through the arts and the possibility of a second career. At the same time, younger artists such as Robert Jinkins from Rewey are honing their exhibition skills and experiences through WRAP on their way to graduate school and a career in the visual arts. Still others, content to consider themselves amateur artists, participate in the Wisconsin Regional Art Program because they are true believers in creative growth for its own sake and love the community of life-long learners they find here. Some older participants, for example, who were forced to put their art aside to make a living or raise a family, today credit WRAP with giving the arts back to them in their retirement years. While they may not be professionals in the sense of making their living in the arts, the art they make often reaches professional level in technique and content.

These artists—like their WRAP predecessors for the last 75 years—create art that reflects cultural and community values, beliefs and identities. This incredible art chronicles their own lives and experiences over time and helps us see, understand, and remember how our many individual experiences add up to a shared Wisconsin history. ✨



Above: Robert Jinkins, *Transplant*, 2015. Mixed media acrylic.

Left: Victoria Bein, *Too Many Cars for a Cat*, 2015. Pastel and carbon pencil.



Ching Kung, *Fall Ashes*, 2014. Oil on board.

Ching Kung is the Vilas Professor of Molecular Biology and Genetics at UW-Madison and a member of the National Academy of Sciences USA. Kung has drawn and painted for more than forty years, and his work has won several awards including the 2012 Ada Biddick Award and 2014 Joseph E. Burk Award of WRAP's State Exhibit.

*Edgerton's Victoria Bein creates drawings and paintings on paper primarily using pastel, carbon pencil, charcoal and gouache. Bein says that by "blending abstract and representational elements, I attempt to order the emotional chaos of the moment" in works like her *Too Many Cars for a Cat*.*



Annette Knapstein, *Bubble*, 2015. Archival pigmented print.



Barbara Kettner, *Bailing in August*, 2015. Watercolor on paper.