

The Art of Henrik Martin Mayer: A Perspective of his Times

WRIGHT MUSEUM OF ART, БЕЛОIT COLLEGE

FRANCIS PUIG

P*icnic on the Allegheny* painted by Henrik Martin Mayer in 1937 is an example of American Regionalist painting at its best. The painting was recently conserved by the Midwest Art Conservation Center with support from the Wanda Hollensteiner Conservation Fund.

A native of New Hampshire, Mayer had a long career as a painter of the American Scene and worked primarily in Indiana and New England. He received his early art education at the Manchester Institute of Arts and Sciences, graduating in 1927. He went on to Yale University and received a Bachelor in Fine Arts in 1931. While at Yale he worked as an apprentice to mural painter Eugene Francis Savage (1883-1978), and he also assisted in the studio of Willie Pogany (1882-1955), a Hungarian-born Illustrator and mural painter. Both painters influenced Mayer's compositions, and use of color.

After an extended trip to Europe, Mayer married fellow Yale art student, Jessie Hull.

The young couple moved to New York City where Mayer began his career as a teacher at the Copper Union, where he painted his first mural for the dining room of the Cosmopolitan Club. In 1933, he accepted a position as the Assistant Director of the John Heron Art School in Indianapolis, a position he held for 13 years. While there, he was awarded commissions to paint three major murals for public buildings in Indiana and Kentucky, and he received numerous private commissions. From 1933 to 1957, he regularly exhibited at the Hoosier Salon.

In 1946, the Mayers moved to Connecticut where Henrik became director of the Hartford Art School of the Wadsworth Athenaeum. In 1956, he became Dean of the Art School of the University of Hartford and chairman of the faculty, positions that allowed him to teach and paint. Upon his death in 1976, the Hartford Art School mounted a retrospective exhibition that included 73 paintings and listed 12 mural commissions, mostly in New England and the Midwest.

Picnic on the Allegheny secures Mayer's place among the Regionalist painters, and demonstrates the tenets of Regionalist style that critics such as Thomas Craven and artists like Thomas Hart Benton espoused as the national style of the United States. Regionalist painters were known for painting scenes that romanticized the past and ignored the dour economy of the Depression. While Mayer's composition evokes early works such as George Bellow's *Picnic* of 1924, the dramatic shifting landscape and painterly brushwork is closely aligned with the work of Thomas Hart Benton, as exemplified by *Moonlight on the Osage* from 1938. In 1937, *Picnic on the Allegheny* was awarded second place at the National academy of Design exhibit. *Picnic on the Allegheny* projects an optimism characteristic of the Regionalism paintings and can be considered one of Mayer's best works.

[1] The information on Regionalism presented here is available from numerous sources, including Nancy Heller and Julia Williams, *The Regionalists* (Watson-Guption Publications, New York, 1976). Information on Mayer can be found in *Henrik Martin Mayer, 1908-1972* (University of Hartford: Joseloff Gallery, Hartford Art School, 1972).