AARON PYLE (1909-1972)

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PORTRAIT OF AARON PYLE

James Denny, Omaha World-Herald
AARON PYLE
(1909–1972)

Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings

Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery
University of Nebraska–Lincoln
September 6 — October 5, 1977

Kearney State College
Kearney
October 30 — November 18, 1977

Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer
Grand Island
November 28 — December 31, 1977

This attraction was made possible with the support of the Nebraska Arts Council, a state agency, and the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency. For information on how the Nebraska Arts Council can support arts activities in your community, contact: The Nebraska Arts Council, 8448 W. Center road, Omaha, NE 68124. Phone: (402) 554-2122
INTRODUCTION

In the 1930's when Regionalism was the dominate style in American art, Aaron Pyle studied with one of its leading exponents, Thomas Hart Benton. From Benton he learned a method, a philosophy and a style. Aaron Pyle began each of his paintings with a series of sketches, preliminary drawings and grisaille studies. The first ideas were drawn in small thumbnail sketches less than two inches square. Second, were larger outline drawings on a grid for enlarging. Third, were tracings which were transferred to illustration board in preparation for a monochrome painting, which was the fourth step in the evolution of a painting. The monochrome was made to establish major light and dark areas and as a check on the design of the composition. This method seems to imply that the artist feared color, and early in his career, Pyle did paint a number of finished pictures in grisaille, e.g. THE BLACKSMITH (catalogue no. 10) and PICKING CORN (catalogue no. 7). However, there is evidence to indicate that he thought about color, because there are index card size paintings in full color which belong to the series of pencil drawings and black and white studies that were made for each painting. Furthermore, it appears that Pyle also executed lithographs of most of his major works.

Egg tempera was Aaron Pyle’s chosen medium for finished works. Often called a difficult and time consuming technique, one of its chief virtues is its quick drying properties. This, along with its insolubility and capacity to adhere to any surface, render it desirable to many artists. In fact it was the chief artist’s medium of the middle ages. Also, it is transparent, has a smooth surface and a soft brushstroke, which are qualities Pyle liked since his painting method was not one dependent on “in painting” and smooth tonalities, but was rather one based on glazing or overpainting. While it is possible to glaze with oil, it is somewhat difficult because oil dries slowly, and the artist cannot apply the next thin, transparent film of color immediately. Thus, egg tempera suited Pyle’s style and temperament.

His careful establishment of all elements in a painting prior to the final picture is an old procedure which now-a-days is usually used only by art students. And in a sense Aaron Pyle was a student all of his life. He followed Thomas Hart Benton's philosophy of painting American life and agrarian subjects in particular. Benton, a thoroughly urban person, drew his inspiration from a life in which he had little first hand experience. His knowledge of rural life was based on observations made on summer walking trips, motor journeys and memories of a childhood spent in southern Missouri. Pyle, actually was a farmer, a working farmer, who painted only when the chores were done, and the subjects he chose were closely related to his life on the farm. In other words, he followed and believed what his mentor stated were the virtues of rural life and their relation to true artistic expression. The ancient myth on which Benton based his philosophy teaches that life in the city is evil, life in the country is good.

Aside from acquiring a method of work and an aesthetic, Pyle also derived a style and palette from Benton. Benton’s style was based on the baroque rhythms of Michaelangelo’s BATTLE OF THE CENTAURS. Aaron Pyle’s style, which is close to Benton’s, however, has forms that are less convoluted and compositions containing fewer elements. In other words, Pyle simplified the Benton style and kept the Benton palette.

After the grey pictures of the early forties, cited above, Pyle’s paintings became more colorful; they were based on the three primaries: red, yellow and blue. But the paintings were not bright, because the colors were greyed. That is, a small amount of a color’s compliment was mixed with the color to lower its intensity and brightness. Exceptions to his usual color scheme
are paintings for the *Omaha World-Herald*. These are bland, they lack strong light and strong
darks and contrasting colors. All the colors are bleached and of the same intensity. This was
done on purpose as an accommodation to the color reproduction process that the newspaper
used for its magazine covers.

Many famous artists have had followers. How often do we see in books and museums pictures
labeled “school of . . .,” “pupil of . . .,” “follower of . . .” and accept what we see as a
credible work of art, one which stands on its own aside from its obvious source of inspiration?
Aaron Pyle bears the same relationship to Benton as Ferdinand Bol bears to Rembrandt. Even
though Bol slavishly carried on the Rembrandt tradition he has descended to us as a recogniz­
able and distinct personality. Those who know, the cognoscenti are able to distinguish his
work from Rembrandt’s. The same applies to Aaron Pyle, who always worked in the Benton
shadow, consistently sending his grisaille paintings to Benton for criticism before enlarging
and painting them in their finished form.

Pyle, never as grand as Benton, codified the master’s style through assimilation and simplifica­
tion and in so doing created his own individual view of the western landscape and life.

**CHRONOLOGY:**

AARON G. PYLE (1909–1972)

born: Towanda, Kansas, February 19, 1909

education: Correspondence school course in cartooning, 1925–26
Graduated Chappell High School, 1926
University of Washington, Seattle
Cornish Art School, Seattle
Kansas City Art Institute, with Thomas Hart Benton, 1938–41

exhibited: Associated American Artists, NY
Denver Art Museum
Nelson Gallery, Kansas City
Alliance and Chappell, NE
Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha (1952)
Old World Art Gallery, Kansas City (1972)

A mural painting, “Windlass Hill at Ash Hollow” was installed in the Lodgepole
State Bank in 1968.
LORD'S CANDLE, 1968, egg tempera
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Jasper W. Meals
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A mural painting, “Windlass Hill at Ash Hollow” was installed in the Lodgepole
State Bank in 1968.
LORD'S CANDLE, 1968, egg tempera

Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Jasper W. Meals
TRAIN, oil

Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Erwin Katz
FEEDING GEESE, egg tempera
Lent by the estate of Rita P. Benton
THISTLES AND SWAMP GRASS, 1943, egg tempera

Lent by the estate of Rita P. Benton
PICKING CORN, 1942, egg tempera

Lent by Joslyn Art Museum
YELLOW VASE, 1960, egg tempera

Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Roger B. Neumann
WORKING ON THE RAILROAD, 1944, egg tempera

Lent by Juanita and Ward Newcomb
BLACKSMITH, 1943, egg tempera
Lent by Juanita and Ward Newcomb
INDIAN VILLAGE, c. 1970, egg tempera

Lent by Dr. and Mrs. William A. Leo
HOMESTEADER, oil
Lent by Johnson County National Bank & Trust Company
HOMESTEADERS, 1962/63, egg tempera

Lent by the estate of Aaron Pyle
FEEDING PIGS, egg tempera

Lent by the estate of Aaron Pyle
KITCHEN STILL LIFE, egg tempera
Nebraska Art Association, gift of Dr. and Mrs. Everett E. Angle
CHECKLIST OF EXHIBITION

1. LORD’S CANDLE, 1968  
   egg tempera, h. 16” x w. 14”  
   Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Jasper Meals

2. THRESHING WHEAT  
   egg tempera, h. 10” x w. 15”  
   Lent by Dr. and Mrs. William Hoadley

3. TRAIN  
   oil, h. 17” x w. 32”  
   Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Erwin Katz

4. FEEDING GEESE  
   egg tempera, h. 13” x w. 16”  
   Lent by the estate of Rita P. Benton

5. CHICKENS  
   egg tempera, h. 7” x w. 6½”  
   Lent by the estate of Rita P. Benton

6. THISTLES AND SWAMP GRASS, 1943  
   egg tempera, h. 22” x w. 16½”  
   Lent by the estate of Rita P. Benton

7. PICKING CORN, 1942  
   egg tempera, h. 14’’” x w. 20’’”  
   Lent by Joslyn Art Museum

8. YELLOW VASE, 1960  
   egg tempera, h. 17½” x w. 21½”  
   Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Roger B. Neemann

9. WORKING ON THE RAILROAD, 1944  
   egg tempera, h. 21½” x w. 27½”  
   Lent by Juanita and Ward Newcomb

10. BLACKSMITH, 1943  
    egg tempera, h. 21½” x w. 25½”  
    Lent by Juanita and Ward Newcomb

11. STUDY FOR BLACKSMITH’s SHOP  
    pencil, h. 6 11/16” x w. 7¼”  
    Lent by estate of Aaron Pyle

12. TWO STUDIES FOR BLACKSMITH’S SHOP  
    gouache and egg tempera  
    Lent by the estate of Aaron Pyle

13. BLACKSMITH SHOP  
    lithograph, h. 12¼” x w. 10½”  
    Lent by the estate of Aaron Pyle

14. SEWING BASKET, 1955  
    egg tempera, h. 18” x w. 15”  
    Lent by Juanita and Ward Newcomb

15. INDIAN VILLAGE, c. 1970  
    egg tempera, h. 13” x w. 19”  
    Lent by Dr. and Mrs. William A. Leo

16. HOMESTEADER  
    oil, h. 15½” x w. 23¼”  
    Lent by Johnson County National Bank & Trust Co.

17. BOY AND DOG IN LANDSCAPE, 1966  
    egg tempera, h. 19” x w. 26”  
    Collection of John W. Callison

18. HOMESTEADERS, 1962/63  
    egg tempera, h. 20” x w. 16”  
    Lent by the estate of Aaron Pyle

19. THE JUNIPER, 1967  
    egg tempera, h. 11 3/16” x w. 14 x 1/8”  
    Lent by the estate of Aaron Pyle

20. STUDY FOR PROGRESS ON PLAINS  
    egg tempera, h. 13 13/16” x w. 32 3/16”  
    Lent by the estate of Aaron Pyle

21. PIG PEN, 1968  
    acrylic, h. 17½” x w. 18½”  
    Lent by the estate of Aaron Pyle

22. FEEDING PIGS  
    egg tempera, h. 15” x w. 20½”  
    Lent by the estate of Aaron Pyle

23. CHICO, 1959  
    egg tempera, h. 20 5/16” x w. 16”  
    Lent by the estate of Aaron Pyle

24. GOING TO TOWN  
    acrylic, h. 5½” egg tempera, w. 8”  
    Lent by the estate of Aaron Pyle

25. LANDSCAPE WITH COWS  
    acrylic, h. 6¾” x w. 9¾”  
    Lent by the estate of Aaron Pyle

26. KITCHEN STILL LIFE  
    egg tempera, h. 11” x w. 8 11/16”  
    Lent by Nebraska Art Association,  
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

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  John W. Callison, Kansas City, MO
  James Denney, Omaha World-Herald
  Mr. Douglas Gilmore, United Missouri Bank of Kansas City, MO
  Dr. and Mrs. William D. Hoadley, Shawnee Mission, KS
  Mr. and Mrs. Erwin Katz, Kansas City, MO
  Johnson County National Bank & Trust Co., Prairie Village, KS
  Johnson-Welsh Gallery, Kansas City, MO
  Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, NE
  Dr. and Mrs. William A. Leo, Shawnee Mission, KS
  Mr. and Mrs. Jasper W. Meals, Shawnee Mission, KS
  Nebraska Art Association
  Nebraska Arts Council
  Mr. and Mrs. Roger B. Neeman, Gladstone, MO
  Juanita and Ward Newcomb, Chappell, NE
  The estate of Aaron Pyle, Chappell, NE
  Gary Zaruba, Kearney, NE

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA–LINCOLN
  Dr. Roy A. Young-Chancellor

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