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Review of Rethinking Regionalism: John Steuart Curry and the Kansas Mural Controversy and Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture.

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statehouse in Topeka. Emphasizing the details of Curry's life and how they interlocked with national, historical, and political happenings between 1937 and 1942, Kendall focuses particularly on the ideological and cultural attitudes that embroiled Curry, newspaper editors, and thousands of Kansans in the mural controversy.

Most of this smoothly written and adequately illustrated study centers on the cultural backgrounds of the Coronado and John Brown panels in the Kansas murals, with less analysis of other sections and details. Placing her art history at the vortex of popular culture, the author provides revealing insights into the varied milieus of the 1930s, Curry's intellectual backgrounds, and Kansas history and experience that caused the debate.

Unfortunately, although the author's title, "Rethinking Regionalism," promises a good deal, she does not follow up very explicitly on that intriguing topic. Suggesting that Curry's paintings, especially those in his controversial murals, are not so much regionalistic as examples of personal, popular, and national cultural-intellectual currents, she fails to deal explicitly or expansively with how Curry's works are not regional. In fact, regionalism is not her central topic, despite her title.

On the other hand, while Kendall's comments on regionalism are disappointingly brief, she has provided a probing and valuable study of art history that tells a good deal about Curry, the 1930s, and Kansas values. As such, her monograph, based on apt uses of manuscript correspondence, newspapers, and cultural studies, is a much more than satisfactory book worthy of mention alongside the work of her mentor in American Studies, Karal Ann Marling, whose recent studies of popular and regional art deserve top billing in those fields.

In the second volume, James M. Dennis's reprinted (and slightly enlarged) study of Grant Wood, the author examines the aesthetic, regional, and cultural environments of the Iowa painter. The most significant section of this stunningly illustrated book centers on Wood's regionalism and, in part, on his contrasts with and similarities to the ideas and experiences of the other two members of the 1930s midwestern

Rethinking Regionalism: John Steuart Curry and the Kansas Mural Controversy. By M. Sue Kendall. New Directions in American Art. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1986. Illustrations, color plates, notes, selected bibliography, index. 164 pp. \$39.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture. By James M. Dennis. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1975, 1986. Illustrations, color plates, notes, index. 256 pp. \$55.

In the first of these two volumes, M. Sue Kendall treats the cultural contexts that helped shape the paintings of John Steuart Curry and sparked reactions to his murals at the Kansas

artistic triumvirate, Curry and Thomas Hart Benton. Less pugnacious and ideological than Benton and more inclined to see nature as beneficent and fruitful than Curry, Wood nonetheless shared with the Missourian and Kansan the conviction that the most notable American art came from painters treating local subjects they knew well.

Dennis devotes considerable space to close readings of dozens of Wood's most notable paintings, including *American Gothic* (1930) and *Stone City* (1930). In these discussions Dennis explores clearly and nearly always convincingly the aesthetic, cultural, and biographical contexts for these major works. Even lay readers will be able to follow his analyses of design, decoration, and technique. One cannot say as much, however, for the chapters detailing Wood's ties to long-held American traditions, such as to the yeoman farmer and the agrarian myth. The final chapters on these topics, brief and very general, weaken Dennis's otherwise strong volume.

Both Kendall and Dennis find regionalism an intriguing topic, but they approach the subject differently. While Kendall compares Curry's paintings with the fiction of Iowa novelist Ruth Suckow, Dennis parallels Wood's artistic works with those of the southern literary Agrarians. Still, neither author expands much on the important national and western regional movements that rippled across the country in the 1920s and 1930s. Other writers ought to study this nationwide regionalism that characterized several western subregions in historiography, literature, art, and architecture during these two decades. Comparative regional studies, especially of the South and West, are likewise needed. Although these two useful analyses of John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood add much to an understanding of these midwestern painters, they also remind one of how much still needs to be learned about regionalism.

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