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Review of A Nebraska Portfolio

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A Nebraska Portfolio. By Robert Hanna. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992. Preface, illustrations. xx + 155 pp. \$35.00.

During a year spent driving around Nebraska, Robert Hanna would pull up in front of a deserted barber shop or an old country schoolhouse or a round barn and take out his sketchbook and pen. *A Nebraska Portfolio* is a collection of the sketches he made.

In his previous book, *Sketches of Nebraska*, Hanna emphasized the transience of the structures he drew. "I looked at them once, scratched out my drawing, and when I looked back they had disappeared—destroyed by fire or weather or the wrecking crew." Although he sketched many sound buildings, the heart of the book was the decrepit and abandoned, and one's strongest sense was of the imminent destruction of these buildings looming drunkenly out of the past.

A *Nebraska Portfolio* displays a wider range of Hanna's interests and techniques. There are drawings of imposing public structures—county courthouses, cathedrals, office buildings. There are also 32 pages of color, ranging from virtuoso atmospheric watercolors to architectural renderings in pen and ink with color overlaid. But again, the spirit of the book is not in the turreted courthouses but in the ramshackle, deteriorating buildings on the dusty streets of small towns.

Except for a couple of distant views of the Omaha and Lincoln skylines, there are no new buildings in here. Of course, every artist knows that old buildings are more paintable than new ones: the sagging and jagged are more picturesque than the straight. But there is more at work than an eye for the picturesque. Hanna is consciously drawn to old buildings as memorials to the past, to the generations who lived in their spaces, to his own childhood in Ewing and Grand Island. These stores and barns and movie theaters represent a frankly romanticized past. More than that, they represent time's inevitable loss. Buildings, like people, change, grow old, and die.

Aside from a few distant figures in architectural renderings, and one rancher in back view, there are no people in these drawings and paintings. I imagine there is a practical reason for this: pulling up at a small town with his sketchbook, Hanna probably found few citizens loitering around ready to step in front of that old building and hold still. (His faithful station wagon is the closest thing to a recurring human presence in these drawings.) We can also read the absence of figures as a further sign of the irreversibility of time: the old schoolhouse still stands, but the kids who ran screaming down its steps are long gone.

Hanna does wonderful things with a pen. He'll tackle anything, from a sandhills landscape with no features more prominent than fence posts, to the large and elaborate Gage County Courthouse. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of these drawings is Hanna's ability to suggest textures: brick, stone, siding, pavement, grass, trees—each dances with a

distinctive linear rhythm. And there is always some blank space amid all the texture. It is a highlight, but it is also Hanna's acknowledgment that a drawing must leave something to the imagination.

The watercolors have a deft touch. The buildings are simply but authoritatively laid down; the skies ooze softly, wet in wet; the foregrounds lead the eye in by means of bold calligraphic slashes. In vignettes, the sparkly white spaces are artfully disposed. The paintings with watercolor over ink are more detailed and solid, but always with some loose areas to relieve architectural precision.

This book is a treat to look through, even for those of us to whom the notion of visiting most of the sites depicted is not attractive. Sometimes, as Hanna says, "through the miracle of drawing, something more interesting emerges in a drawing than existed in the subject."

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