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1996

## MARI SANDOZ'S PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST'S YOUTH ROBERT HENRI'S NEBRASKA YEARS

Helen Winter Stauffer

*University of Nebraska at Kearney*

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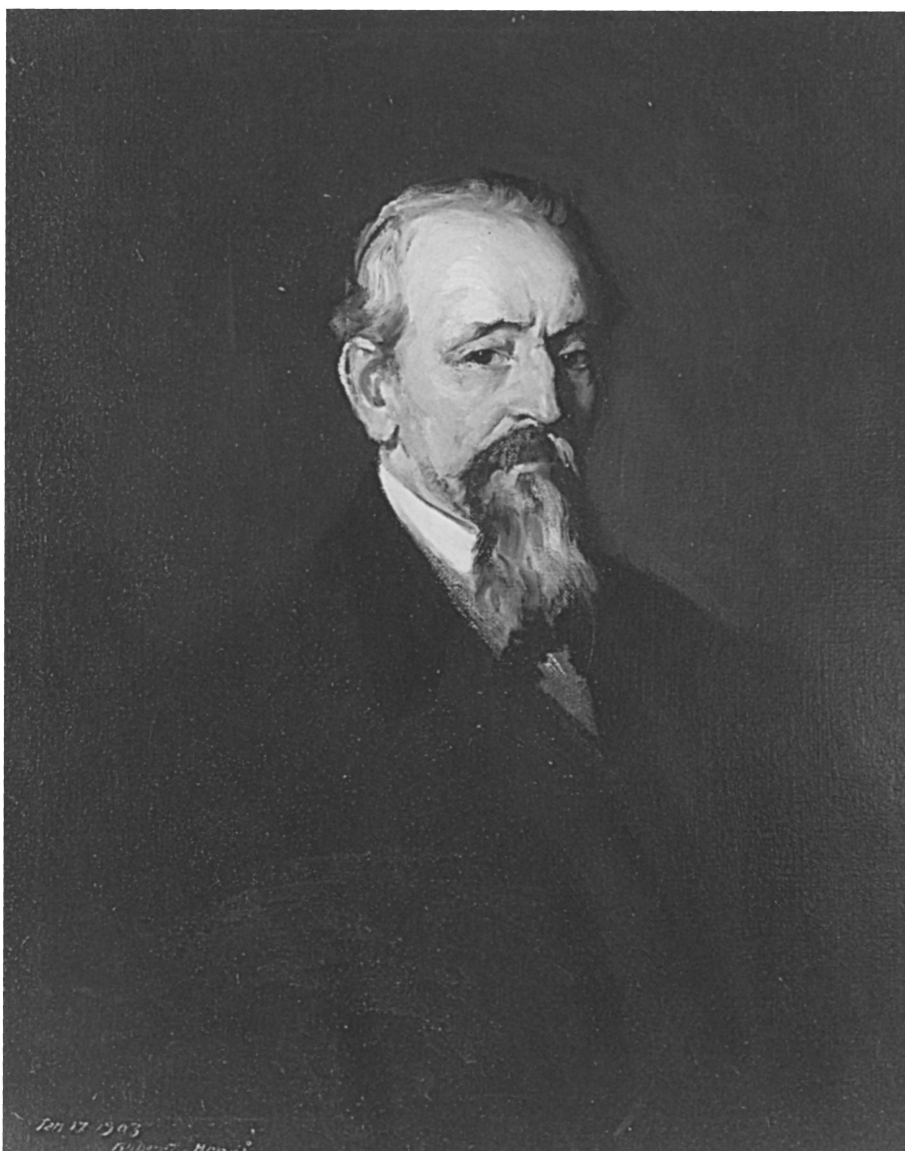


FIG. 1. Robert Henri, 1865-1929, Portrait of John J. Cozad, 1903, oil on canvas, 32 in. x 26 in. Courtesy of Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Gift of Olga N. Sheldon.

A long time he looked at the dark intensity of the eyes, the whiteness of the face, the fine, thin nose, the heightened temples, the streaks in the hair and beard, the white linen sharp against the darkness of background and broadcloth. . . .

Now finally, smiling into his father's eyes, the artist picked up a brush, dipped it into the black, and in the left-hand corner signed the portrait. He did it firmly, as always: Robert Henri, dotting the *i* very carefully.<sup>1</sup>

# MARI SANDOZ'S PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST'S YOUTH ROBERT HENRI'S NEBRASKA YEARS

HELEN WINTER STAUFFER

Robert Henri's life story would have appealed to Mari Sandoz even if he were not an important early twentieth-century American artist. Robert Henri (born Robert Henry Cozad) came from a time, a place, and a family that at first glance seem unlikely to have produced an *avant garde* painter of landscapes, cityscapes, and portraits; it was the sort of paradox Sandoz liked to explore. That Henri had spent much of his youth in her native Nebraska in a family headed by a magnetic and dominating man not unlike her own father also interested her. That the family left Nebraska in disgrace made the story even more intriguing. The result of

Sandoz's fascination was her 1960 historical novel, *Son of the Gambler Man*.

Mari Sandoz, author of more than twenty books about her native area, the trans-Missouri region, was born on a Niobrara River homestead in 1896; she grew up in a violent family in the sandhills of northwestern Nebraska during the frontier period. When she was twenty-three, she moved east to Lincoln and attended the University of Nebraska to learn how to write about the world she knew. Later she would live in Denver for three years before moving to New York City, but her focus remained on the history, geography, and people of her native West.

## ORIGINS OF THE NOVEL

In a letter written shortly after the publication of *Son of the Gambler Man* Sandoz explained the novel's origins.

This book had its roots in my early childhood out in the homestead period of northwest Nebraska and in a combination of other circumstances. One was the presence of several of the men involved in the Olive

*Helen Winter Stauffer is professor of English, emerita, at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. Her many publications include Mari Sandoz, Story Catcher of the Plains (1982), the standard biography of Sandoz, and Letters of Mari Sandoz (1992).*

[GPQ 16 (Winter 1996): 54-66]

mob that hanged and burned the two settlers, Mitchell and Ketchum in Custer County, Nebraska. When the leaders of the mob were arrested it was suddenly very unhealthy for the rest to remain where they could at the very least, be subpoenaed as witnesses. They skipped out to the wilder regions of northwest Nebraska, just opening to white man occupancy then.

As children we heard the stories some of them told about a gambler, John J. Cozad who had stood against the Olives and their outfit because, with money and guns they controlled Plum Creek, the county seat of Dawson County, in which this Cozad had started a community and brought in homeseekers for both the railroad lands he had for sale and for the government land, free for the taking, but claimed by cattlemen, illegally of course. Because our father, "Old Jules" Sandoz was a locator of homeseekers too, and fought the battles of the settlers against the ranchers who were enforcing their lawless claim in the free land with guns too, these stories had special poignancy for us.

The interplay among land, animals, humans, and the introduction of a new culture to a region was a major theme in all Sandoz's works.

Growing up in a formative region, I became deeply interested in formative periods, whether of a region, a group or community, or of an individual. Later I discovered that almost no one knew the origins of Robert Henri or that he spent the years from seven to seventeen in one of the more violent regions of the west—Dawson County, Nebraska, the son of a professional gambler with the dream of building a perfect community.

Sandoz used her favorite simile to explain her intent:

Such periods reminded me of the growth of a garnet from its gray matrix, and I wanted

to study the components of that matrix, the pressures and heats put upon it, the crystalizations often partial and flawed, but now and then perfect, a well-faceted jewel.<sup>2</sup>

Sandoz described her research for the novel, explaining how she had gathered notes for this story while working on her Great Plains Series; her trips to Cozad and Lexington, Nebraska; her interviews with old timers, whose memories could reach back sixty years or so; her searches through local and regional newspapers of the period as well as "newspaper accounts and letters . . . from Denver to Ohio and the Atlantic coast."<sup>3</sup>

The last section of this long letter delineates her methods of shaping and writing the book. As always, she cross-indexed her information and used it as an overview. Then she began her first chapter, writing as fast as possible, usually in long-hand to get "some movement and mood into it, some foreboding." Next she laid out the complicated and contradictory material in sections, "evaluating sources, judging the probabilities by later evidence." As she usually did, she revised this first draft again and again, shaping the story.

I rewrote the book several times . . . Then I took the manuscript back to Cozad and the Platte country to check on my descriptions, on my sense of mood, of place, of character. Finally, when it seemed I was losing more in freshness than the additional polish justified, I stopped.<sup>4</sup>

As Sandoz explains, she was drawn to an artist whose formative years had been spent in a region that was itself forming a culture. Nor were Henri and Sandoz alone in growing out of the gray matrix of the Great Plains. Often these creative people seem to have grown up in isolation, the only ones of their generation in their community or family to develop their genius. They came from various levels of society, from different time periods, from families with widely different degrees of or interest in education. The Nebraska cohort included

Willa Cather, Weldon Kees, Wright Morris, John G. Neihardt, Howard Hansen, and Loren Eiseley. Others have noted this phenomenon, but it was Mari Sandoz who was drawn to write on the Plains childhood of Robert Henri.

#### THE NOVEL ITSELF

Sandoz's book is to some extent a *bildungsroman*, depicting the development of the young boy Robert Henry Cozad into the adult artist known as Robert Henri, but the book has two additional protagonists: Robert's father, John J. Cozad, the gambler and townsite promoter; and the land, the Platte River valley in Nebraska. The story begins in 1872 with John J. Cozad walking near the 100th Meridian, north of the river, contemplating the development of a community of homesteaders. Typically, Sandoz sketches in the landscape, indicating both the beauty and the danger of the area: The "sweep of hay-length grass running in the wind like some green and shadowed sea along the bottoms, but tawnier, and russet in seed toward the higher ground where he stood" (10), "the thick and glistening black . . . sprays" of chokecherries and the "golden, red-cheeked wild plums" (13) are balanced by the August sun beating down unmercifully and a large and lethal rattlesnake. As he walks along the recently laid railroad tracks, Cozad dreams of the community he hopes to name after himself, "a fine young city," and a "fine white mansion" (11). Returning to Cincinnati, Ohio, he sets up an office to recruit settlers and arranges to bring his wife and two sons to the new site.

Thereafter, most of the events are seen from young Robert's point of view, although Sandoz occasionally reverts to an omniscient narrator. As several reviewers have noted, the story is essentially that of a sensitive, talented boy growing up in the midst of frontier violence, but it is also the story of the ambitious promoter. The father's temperament and his conflicts affect Robert's life during the Cozad years. John J. invites resentment and anger by his hauteur, his fierce temper, his ostentation, and his reputation as a gambler (although he will

not permit gambling in Cozad). An inveterate entrepreneur and optimist, the locator is challenged constantly, often by his own settlers, who blame Cozad, whose recruiting posters had pictured a land of milk and honey where settlers find only drought, grasshoppers, blizzards, hail, and cattlemen determined to drive the small landowners out. Cozad himself is beset by the cattlemen, who control the region from the Dawson County seat of Plum Creek (now Lexington) fifteen miles to the east.

Robert, the younger son, who first comes to the region in 1873 at the age of seven, is often puzzled by his father's activities but, a typical Victorian child, he seldom asks questions, and when he does, he is fobbed off with a vague or misleading answer. Robert is often aware of danger, and his feeling of foreboding appears throughout. "Robert was uneasy about the Denver trip" (255). "Robert Cozad knew he had to be careful now" (261). "[T]he danger he was just beginning to realize, danger so terrible, with the talk of lynching, that it made his insides go like muddy water to think about it" (112).

Robert and his father are never close, but though John J. is at times stern and gruff to his sons, he is proud of them, gives them responsibility, and is concerned for their reputations and well-being. Sometimes preoccupied and remote, often gone on some financial scheme or other, he leaves much of his sons' upbringing to their genteel mother, but despite John J.'s failings the family stays together. Over the years Robert recognizes flaws in his father's character—not his gambling, but his philandering, his contact with nefarious characters, his questionable business dealings. Nevertheless, Robert remains fiercely loyal and often proud of his father.

Despite conflict and violence, Robert's life on the open, unfenced prairie is often full of pleasure. He and his brother swim in and ride their horses through the Platte in the summer, ice skate on it in the winter. They hunt, befriend an injured Pawnee after a battle between the Pawnees and Sioux, and search for

arrowheads, other artifacts, and bird nests. Robert marvels at the beauty of the prairie: "They reached the west on a fine spring day, the sky far and blue, the eagle circling high up like a loose black eyelash, floating. The smell of wild plum blossoms was heavy on the wind and the black and white bobolinks . . . rose high into the air, dropping music as they climbed up, up and then drifted back to the ground where the nest was probably well hidden in the tufted grass" (56).

True to Sandoz's theme, the land holds danger as well. The river is always treacherous, especially in the spring, when it "began to rise . . . the sudden gray . . . of the crest rolling with piles of brush and submerged tumbleweeds, trash, trees and pieces of shacks and hogpens" (86). Tornados, rattlesnakes, prairie dog holes that can break a horse's leg and throw the rider, sudden storms, and killing cold are among the hazards. Sandoz may be recalling her own youthful experiences with the physical world of the Plains in picturing nature "red in tooth and claw," but the historical records of the 1870s bear out her descriptions.

Robert and his brother Johnny live a life of dramatic contrasts: the free and easy life of the boys out on the Plains is bounded by school, often back in Cincinnati, by local contretemps, and by the strict middle class rules of etiquette and behavior set by their parents. Robert works out much of his confusion through his drawing and writing. From early childhood the young left-hander had drawn pictures to illustrate the stories he created about the people and events around him. Sandoz describes him at age eleven:

Robert Cozad was a lean and thin-wristed boy, still with the short chin of his father and the same dark eyes that already seemed to carry their own light. Several times he had started a diary and usually kept up the decorations, the little pictures, longer than the words, perhaps because there were so many things that it was not nice to speak about. He did insert little stories of adven-

ture, stories a little like those the mother had read to the boys years ago. (145)

Robert's childhood ends with the dramatic confrontation during which John J. Cozad shoots a settler in self defense. Because John J. has aroused so much hostility in the community that he fears being lynched, the entire family flees east. The parents change their names to Mr. and Mrs. Richard H. Lee. The two sons also take aliases: Johnny becomes Frank Sothern; Robert becomes Robert Earl Henri. Later he dropped the "Earl" to become simply Robert Henri (despite its French spelling, the artist always insisted on an Americanized pronunciation, "Hen-rye"). The Lees claim that the boys are foster brothers whom they have adopted. Although the father is eventually exonerated for the killing, the family continue throughout their lives to use their pseudonyms. The adult sons never return to Cozad.

#### TAKING UP THE STORY

The story eventually faded from the Cozad area, but not from the memories of the Cozad family. Although Robert Henri talked about his years on the Plains to a few close friends, nothing of his youthful experiences reached the general public until long after his death in 1929. Guy Pène du Bois, who had studied under him and worked closely with him, remarked in a 1920 article, "Although I have known him for nearly twenty years I know nothing of his antecedents. He came out of the West, studied in Philadelphia, spent eleven years [sic] in Paris and loomed suddenly, about 1900, on New York's art horizon as a radical who must be reckoned with."<sup>5</sup>

Mari Sandoz, however, had heard of some of the details of Henri's story, as she commented in her 1960 letter. And Dr. Robert Gatewood, a cousin of Henri's, thought the story worth telling, but he was willing to give it only to someone he felt could do it justice. It was through Mari's friend Leonard Thiessen,

a well-known Nebraska artist and art critic, that Dr. Gatewood approached Sandoz. She was pleased but hesitant:

This story . . . is the best material lying idle in this region, and it certainly should be done. Because its first impact upon the public will be the only one that will have a chance to do well, it should be done by the best writer you can get, one with the ability to ferret out significant detail, have sufficient historical background to make the times as well as the people live. In addition the writer should have a good understanding of both the creative temperament in general, the artist in particular, and know considerably of modern art. There are . . . several who could do the book better than I, I'm sure.

But if you have no one else by the time my Indian book (already contracted for) is finished I should like to hunt you up and talk it over. Unfortunately this won't be until the fall of 1942.

P.S. Nothing of this story will get out through me. I realize how important secrecy in this matter is—in addition to the ethical compunctions I would naturally feel.<sup>6</sup>

Sandoz herself was well acquainted with modern art. Although she apparently had little formal training in art principles, she had shared living quarters during her early Lincoln years with Louise Austin, an art instructor at the university. Sandoz also knew Dwight Kirsh, chairman of the art department, and was well acquainted with practitioners and critics of the fine arts in Lincoln, Denver, and New York. Throughout her adult life she spoke and wrote of artists and attended their gallery and museum exhibitions. Her correspondence includes considerable discussion (and criticism) of various artists; she owned numerous art books, and she certainly had read Robert Henri's *The Art Spirit*. But it was the relationship between his early plains experiences and Henri's development as an

artist that interested Sandoz most.<sup>7</sup> Psychologists agree that the early years of life are the most significant in shaping the adult; here was a young life filled with action, conflict, and drama, certain to remain in Henri's memories, no matter how carefully hidden from public view.

Few of Henri's biographers have dwelt on details of his western years, but William Innes Homer agrees with Sandoz that much of the artist's personality could be explained by that formative period in the West. As Homer points out, Henri kept diaries and journals from the time he was fourteen. "The surviving diaries comprise an invaluable record of his daily activities, as well as of local events in Cozad," he states. Sandoz saw some of the diaries and she told Homer that she had studied some of the boy's art works, saved by a cowboy from Cozad who had moved to the Nebraska Sandhills.<sup>8</sup>

#### A LONG GERMINATION

Although Sandoz was concentrating on an Indian biography in late 1939 when Dr. Gatewood proposed that she write about Henri, she often researched more than one book at a time. Her longtime friend from Denver, Caroline Bancroft, herself a writer and historian, asserted that while Sandoz lived in Denver (1940-42), she devoted considerable time to looking unsuccessfully for information about John J. Cozad's Denver activities, even as she was writing *Crazy Horse*.<sup>9</sup>

Sandoz had more luck interviewing "old timers" in Cozad and Lexington, but put aside *Son of the Gambler Man* to write *The Tom-Walker*, published by Dell in 1944. By 1949, she hoped to have *Son* ready in 1952, and suggested a package deal to include it with *Foal of Heaven* (1993), a novella set on the Lazy VV Ranch near Nederland, Colorado, and *Cheyenne Autumn* (1953), her account of a small band of Cheyenne Indians attempting to return to their homeland in Montana from a southern Indian reservation in 1878-79. The package never materialized.<sup>10</sup> In 1954



FIG. 2. *Robert Henri, Portrait of Eulabee Dix in Her Wedding Gown, 1910, oil.* Courtesy of the Museum of Nebraska Art, University of Nebraska at Kearney.



Sandoz was once more concerned with *Son*, but instead worked on *Miss Morissa* (1955) and *The Horsecatcher* (1958). In 1956 both *The Horsecatcher* and *The Cattlemen* (1958), one of her Great Plains series, were well underway and she again turned to *Son*.

By then, sixteen years after her first commitment, the long forgotten secret of the Cozad family's turbulent years in Nebraska had been revealed in Van Wyck Brooks's biography of John Sloan, a longtime friend of Henri's. A local newspaper man in Nebraska, Harry B. Allen, had ferreted out the story and published it in the Cozad and Omaha papers. Furthermore, Frank Johnson, a Lexington lawyer and University of Nebraska regent had sent Sandoz a substantial locally printed booklet, *The Early History of Cozad and Surrounding Community*, he had assisted in producing. It contained many first-hand interviews that covered much of the Cozad story. Sandoz had already found the material herself through contemporary newspapers, interviews, diaries and other repositories, but she was not satisfied that she had all she needed. In 1958 she returned to Nebraska to promote her latest book, *The Cattlemen*, and to continue her research on the Cozad story.<sup>11</sup> By 1959 she had finished the novel, but her contracted publisher wanted changes.

As Sandoz explained to her agent, Mary Abbot,

This book of mine is a step by step development of this painter Henri in a family and a locale where such a talent had never shown itself. I was interested in his techniques and also in the great qualities of leadership that helped limit Henri as a painter but perhaps helped make a greater contribution to American art than if he had developed the painting potentialities of an angel.<sup>12</sup>

Sandoz found another publisher. Many art historians, critics, and Henri's own students had written about his work and his teaching, but

only Van Wyck Brooks had mentioned his Nebraska years, and Brooks did not discuss how Henri's childhood had affected the man with the mysterious past who had become the artist.

#### ROBERT HENRI THE ARTIST

After three years (1886-88) at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, Henri studied in Europe, particularly in Paris, from 1888 to 1891. He would continue to cross the Atlantic regularly for the rest of his life. What he saw, what he embraced, and what he rejected jolted the complaisant American art establishment. He was certainly not an advocate of adopting European painting wholesale. While he revered a few of the old Spanish and Dutch masters, Goya, Velasquez, Frans Hals, Vermeer, and especially Rembrandt, he rejected most of their predecessors and, except for the early Manet, most of the impressionists and post-impressionists. In a Whitman-like sense he was valiantly American and insisted that his students paint as Americans. His primary mentors were Thomas Eakins, Thomas Anshutz, and Winslow Homer.

He is credited with rejuvenating a derivative national art that was "vaguely cosmopolitan and generally anemic" into something that could learn from European masters and yet develop a virile life of its own.<sup>13</sup> According to Norman Geske,

One has only to get the feel of the man and his work to sense that his place in American art is peculiarly important . . . bringing to a crux, and an end, the problem of relating American art to European art as something other than an essentially "provincial" expression. One thing is certain, after Henri things were different.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the quality of Henri's painting, the phenomenal influence of his teaching has tended to overshadow it. His reputation

came, as Sandoz remarked in her letter to Mary Abbot, through his effect on his students, two generations of men and women including Edward Hopper, Rockwell Kent, Gifford Beal, Man Ray, and Stuart Davis. According to Guy Pène du Bois, one of his students, "Henri set the class in an uproar. Completely overturned the apple cart: displaced art by life, discarded technic, broke the prevailing gods as easily as porcelain. The talk was uncompromising, the approach unsubtle, the result pandemonium." He added, "Henri possessed a powerful elixir which he dispensed with the greatest generosity."<sup>15</sup>

As a dynamic teacher and natural leader, Henri, when he returned to New York from Europe, quickly gathered a coterie, whom he encouraged to paint what they saw around them in the city, particularly New York. Their realism shocked and in some cases disgusted the critics. Unable to get their work accepted for juried exhibits, John Sloan, William Glackens, George Luks, Arthur P. Davies, Ernest Lawson, Everett Schinn, and Maurice Prendergast, led by Henri, formed themselves into a group now famous as "The Eight."

Their 1908 show at Macbeth Gallery in New York was immensely successful, drawing thousands of visitors. It was also immensely controversial. "Vulgarity smites one in the face at this exhibition," commented one critic. Another asked, "Is it fine art to exhibit our sores?"<sup>16</sup> The group became known as "The Ashcan School" because their subject matter included saloons, blue collar workers, East Side Manhattan slums, and industrial sites. Others dubbed them "The Revolutionary Black Gang" because of their penchant for painting in blacks, grays, browns, and other dark tones.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, the art world was jolted. Younger painters flocked to Henri's philosophy and to his classes. Edward Hopper averred that Henri "was the most influential teacher I ever had," and Man Ray declared that Henri's cardinal rule was "trying to assert our individuality even at the risk of being misunderstood."<sup>18</sup>

Sandoz is not the only critic to remark that Henri's own painting may have suffered because of his teaching, but his work remains substantial. Despite his many battles with the establishment, in 1929 the Art Council of New York selected him as one of three top living American artists.

Undoubtedly, Sandoz was attracted to Henri's ability to confront the establishment, to win important battles, and to change "what was." Henri may well have inherited his willingness to tilt at windmills from his feisty father. Certainly he was never afraid to take on the establishment, but his personality and milieu differed considerably from those of the older man. Although he became less radical as he grew older, he remained a vital voice on the art scene. Guy Pène du Bois said in 1920, "His violence has paled a little. But committees still fear his strength."<sup>19</sup>

#### HENRI AND SANDOZ

Sandoz, if she had been inclined to introspection, would have found that she and Henri had much in common. She too was a rebel who brought from her own frontier experience a healthy skepticism about authoritarianism in any form. She surely approved of Henri's willingness to take chances. His works, unlike those of most of his followers, had begun to sell by 1908, so when he risked his career organizing the MacBeth Gallery show that would redefine the subject matter of American art, he had much to lose.<sup>20</sup> Although Henri came to Nebraska twenty-three years before Sandoz was born, their early years close to the power and beauty of nature and their childhood memories of the violence and lawlessness of their neighborhoods helped to determine their philosophies and their personalities.

Nor was Nebraska all that Sandoz and Henri shared. Both had violent fathers, community builders constantly in conflict with neighbors and the law. Both had to overcome considerable adversity to achieve their goals, although the obstacles were different. Both spent years

of intense effort in learning their craft. Both confirmed their beliefs in their reading of Whitman and Emerson.

They also shared certain personality traits that may well have drawn Sandoz to a sympathy for her subject. Both had that ineffable quality that makes an outstanding teacher, Henri in art, Sandoz in writing, although his influence was more extensive than hers. Both had an extraordinary gift for verbal communication. An observer of the art scene lauded Henri in 1915 for

efficiency in the art of painting and in the art of talking. That combination is so rare that one must view it with something of the awe felt for the Gutenberg Bible. Mr. Henri is a great teacher for great men, an exhilaration—for weak men, who perhaps do not matter anyway, he is as insidious as any powerful drug, a thing that begins nibbling at their petty personalities and ends by swallowing them whole.<sup>21</sup>

While Sandoz never received such a specific encomium her friends and acquaintances remarked on her ability to talk at length and with encyclopedic knowledge on almost any subject. Coming from a story telling region, she was strongly influenced by oral language, delighted in it, and focussed on local language forms in her writing.

Sandoz may also have been attracted to Henri's story because both concealed parts of their youth from their publics, Henri his Cozad years and Sandoz her five-year marriage to sandhills rancher Wray Macumber. Henri told certain friends something of his story, writing in 1926, "The constructive enthusiasms of my father counted favorably against an environment—the far West, cowboys, etc. etc., in which there was no association with artists."<sup>22</sup> Sandoz, on the other hand, never referred in writing to her own secret except for carefully worded allusions in letters to her own family. And, while Sandoz's family was at best indifferent—and sometimes actively opposed—to her writing, Henri's family, particu-

larly his art-loving mother, encouraged and financed him.

#### RECEPTION OF THE BOOK

In 1960, twenty years after Sandoz began it, *Son of the Gambler's Man* was published by Clarkson Potter. Back in 1955 McGraw-Hill had contracted for it, but when the editor saw the manuscript in 1959, he suggested a number of changes. Typically, Sandoz returned the advance and found a different publisher.<sup>23</sup> Almost all critics panned the book. One bright spot occurred during a book signing in Denver, when three granddaughters of Theresa Cozad's brother Taber Gatewood (Robert Henri's cousins) came to praise the book. This erased the worry that the family of the principal characters would object to Sandoz's characterizations. (That it drew ire from the families of other figures in the book did not surprise or puzzle her.)

Sandoz never apologized for this book, although she had chosen to complicate her task by refusing to use fictional plot, characters, or scenes contradicted by her research. As she explained to Mary Abbot, Sandoz intended the book to be fiction, but she kept it as close as possible to non-fiction. All her characters were people who had actually existed; their actions, as far as she could determine, were historically accurate, but their precise emotions in certain scenes she had to imagine. As she says in her foreword,

I have kept to the facts available and only filled in the few holes necessary to reconstruct something of the crucible in which the dross of the son's youth was burned away and the gold of it freed to find itself. (x)

She told a friend that she had had more trouble writing this book than any other and had written at least two complete versions, possibly more.<sup>24</sup>

Both the critics and the public misunderstood Sandoz's intent. She stressed that her

interest was in the development of Henri the artist. Responding to Mary Abbot's query about her approach to this book, Sandoz wrote:

Oh you are mistaken about my having any doubt over the form *The Son of the Gambler Man* was to take. You may recall that Ed [Kuhn, an editor at McGraw-Hill] tried to pressure me into making the book non-fiction and that I refused flatly. I said I could not fill in the necessary holes and that I wanted the form to be a written approximation of a Henri painting. Furthermore, my non fiction is really non fiction.

My only structural problem in the book was the handling of the material of the 1883-1903 period. Fortunately the father's portrait was painted in a building that I know quite well, one I've visited many times, particularly the Allen Williams studio, which had no changes since the 1903 period.<sup>25</sup>

#### PAINTING THE PORTRAIT

The novel ends with a fictionalized epilogue in which Robert Henri is painting his father's portrait (Fig. 1). This section recapitulates the Cozad years, establishes the fact of Henri's success as an artist, recognizes both his European and American training, and refers to his students and followers. Sandoz mentions Henri's art theories and alludes almost for the first time to his love of fun, of wit, and of plain tom-foolery. Henri's recollections as he works on the portrait—and his father's as he sits for it—not only fill in the twenty-one years that have elapsed since the family's flight from Cozad but also explain to the reader how Henri's Nebraska youth marked his work as a painter. He recalls the vastness and newness of the country, the people he knew, and the conflicts the family experienced, but he thinks particularly of his closeness to the land, a feeling he has never lost. Henri himself, not Sandoz's fictionalized art-

ist, had written to a friend about the value of his childhood to his work. "That boy's life is part of my experience—my storehouse—and it does not matter to me at all that I didn't paint a picture when I was in the cradle."<sup>26</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

The setting for *Song of the Gambler Man* is the Great Plains, more specifically the Nebraska that Sandoz knew so well, but the story is not so much about the Platte valley as it is about how this specific man grew into one of the most influential artists and teachers of the early twentieth century. Sandoz had two compelling reasons for being attracted to the story. To Westerners, of course, an obvious one is the setting—Cozad, Nebraska. But just as interesting to her was the protagonist, Robert Henry Cozad/Robert Henri, and his development from a shy, diffident boy to a self-assured artist.

Although not her best book, Sandoz's *Son of the Gambler Man* has much to appreciate. Her picture of Henri's years in Cozad and his later relationship with his parents and brother does what she intended: to create with words a parallel to Henri's own paintings. Perhaps her own unhappy and violent childhood, described so graphically in her *Old Jules* and elsewhere, influenced her emphasis on the dark shades, tones, and colors of Henri's early work, rather than the light and bright colors of his later portraits. When she limns in detail the foreboding, the fear, the confrontations, and the violence that were the consequences of John J. Cozad's life in the West, she blames him for having "condemned his son to live and die under a fictitious name and biography" (ix).

Henri's own writings and recollections seem to indicate a somewhat sunnier view. His many letters to his parents often begin with "Dear Missus and Boss" or "Dear Folks at Home," which seems to suggest an easier relationship than Sandoz depicts.<sup>27</sup> Sandoz herself, however, also often made light of her own family



FIG. 3. Robert Henri, 1865-1929, *The Pink Pinafore*, 1926, oil on canvas, 24 in. x 20 in. Courtesy of Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, F. M. Hall Collection.

history in lectures and in letters. Psychologists undoubtedly have an explanation for this kind of revisionist recollection.

*Son of the Gambler's Man* is Sandoz's portrait of the youth of the artist, based on her years of research, interviewing, and study, both in Nebraska and in the East. Henri himself said, "Paint a portrait to know the sitter." To read this portrait of an artist is also to know something of Mari Sandoz the portraitist.

## NOTES

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, Lincoln, Nebraska, 15 October 1994.

1. Mari Sandoz, *Son of the Gambler's Man: The Youth of an Artist* (1960; rpt. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976), p. 333. All further page references are from this edition in parentheses in the text.

2. Sandoz to unknown addressee, 14 August 1960, Sandoz Collection, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Archives (hereafter cited as UNLA).

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Guy Pène du Bois, "Robert Henri the Man, An Evolution from Radicalism to Tolerance," *Arts and Decoration* 14 (November 1920): 36.

6. Sandoz to Dr. Robert Gatewood, 5 August 1939, *Letters of Mari Sandoz*, ed. Helen Winter Stauffer (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), pp. 56-57.

7. Caroline Sandoz Pifer to Stauffer, 5 September 1995; Sandoz private library collection UNLA.

8. William Innes Homer with Violet Organ, *Robert Henri and his Circle* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), p. 15.

9. Stauffer interview with Caroline Bancroft, July 1976.

10. Sandoz to Peggy Benjamin, 13 April 1960 in *Letters*, p. 352 Sandoz offered the deal to Atlantic Press and to Knopf. Both turned it down. Sandoz to "Ted" [Weeks, editor of Atlantic Press], 30 April 1949.

11. Van Wyck Brooks, *John Sloan, A Painter's Life* (New York: Dutton, 1955), p. 17; Charles E.

Allen, ed., *Early History of Cozad and Surrounding Community* (Cozad, Nebraska: Cozad Local Press, n.d. [1955]). Harry Allen's information was published in the *Cozad Local* under the headline "Reveal True Story of John J. Cozad," but most of the issue was devoted to the Cozad story, with many separate articles including one by-lined Dr. Robert H. Gatewood. *Cozad Local*, 27 November 1956, pp. 1-8. See also "Cozad Mystery Cleared," *Omaha Sunday World-Herald Magazine*, 16 December 1956, pp. 3, 19.

12. Sandoz to Abbot, 28 March 1959, *Letters*, pp. 337-38.

13. Brooks, *John Sloan* (note 11 above), p. 73.

14. Norman Geske, Foreword, *Robert Henri, 1865-1925-1965: An Exhibition Held in Observance of the Centennial of the Artist's Birth, October 12 through November 7, 1965* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, 1965), p. 7.

15. Guy Pène du Bois, *Artists Say the Silliest Things* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940), pp. 86, 90.

16. Critics quoted, Bennard B. Perlman, "Rebels with a Cause: The Eight," *Art News* 81 (December 1982): 62.

17. The Eight was not a school, strictly speaking, as there was great diversity in subject matter and treatment among the members. Their one specific characteristic in common was rebellion against the pretty, pale, and sterile paintings in favor at that time with the establishment.

18. Hopper and Ray quoted in Bennard B. Perlman, "Practicing Preacher," *Art and Antiques* 7 (November 1990): 88.

19. du Bois, "Robert Henri the Man," (note 9 above), p. 36.

20. Avis Berman, "An Artist like a Rock Ripping Bolts of Lace," *Smithsonian* 15 (May 1984): 150.

21. "Who's Who in American Art," *Arts and Decoration Magazine* 6 (November 1915): 33.

22. Henri to Thelma Anthony, 3 March 1926, Homer, *Circle* (note 8 above), p. 13.

23. Sandoz to Abbot, 19 April 1959, *Letters* (note 6 above), p. 338.

24. Stauffer telephone interview with James F. Carr, July 1994.

25. Sandoz to Abbot (note 23 above).

26. Henri to George B. Zug, 14 August 1919, Homer, *Circle* (note 8 above), p. 13.

27. Homer, *Circle* (note 8 above), p. 273, n. 25.