

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

2009

**Review of *John Steuart Curry's "Hoover and the Flood": Painting Modern History*. By Charles C. Eldredge**

Wendy Jean Katz

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, [wkatz2@unl.edu](mailto:wkatz2@unl.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Katz, Wendy Jean, "Review of *John Steuart Curry's "Hoover and the Flood": Painting Modern History*. By Charles C. Eldredge" (2009). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1216.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1216>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

*John Steuart Curry's "Hoover and the Flood": Painting Modern History.* By Charles C. Eldredge. Foreword by Kevin Grogan. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. xvi + 86 pp. Map, figures, color plates, notes, index. \$29.95.

In this multidimensional study of a single painting, *Hoover and the Flood*, art historian Charlie Eldredge asks, "Why was [John Steuart] Curry, an artist generally associated with midwestern landscape and genre subjects drawn from his Kansas upbringing, depicting a subject from the Mississippi Delta? Why was he tackling a subject of national rather than regional or simply personal consequence?" He finds answers in politics, in Curry's artistic ambitions and sense of social responsibility, and in popular and literary interest in the enduring power of the nation's rivers. The result will interest scholars of 1930s regionalism, whatever their discipline.

In an accessible style, Eldredge suggests that after controversy derailed Curry's historical murals for the Topeka, Kansas, statehouse, Curry turned to national media to bring his version of what Van Wyck Brooks called the "usable past," narrative art capable of creating a "community spirit" in the face of modern perils, to a broad audience. In this case, *Life Magazine* in 1940 commissioned Curry, known for painting Kansas storms, to portray the Mississippi flood of 1927, which covered 26,000 square miles and, when levees broke at 145 points, killed 246 people. Herbert Hoover directed relief efforts, and his success contributed to his election as President in 1928. *Life* publisher Henry Luce, a fellow Republican, presumably selected the subject to redeem Hoover's reputa-

tion and his policy of relying on private charity for relief.

Eldredge attends to both the history of the 1927 flood and the iconography of floods generally. He argues Curry constructs Hoover as a Moses, bringing order out of the physical chaos and multiracial suffering of the refugee camp. But was Curry, a La Follette Progressive sympathetic to the New Deal, a true believer in the humanitarian Hoover? The painting's staged quality, with an isolated, inactive Hoover posing for the viewer and the prominent newsreel camera, evokes traditional history painting, but it also highlights the mechanisms of modern myth-making. Perhaps Curry, an NAACP supporter, was aware of that organization's criticism of Hoover: W. E. B. Du Bois recommended risking death rather than the camps, for the black man could expect no relief: "Mr. Hoover is too busy having his picture taken . . ." ("Flood," *Crisis*, July 1927, 168).

In a slender, well-illustrated volume covering centuries of art about floods, including works from the 1980s, inevitably some historical connections are not fully developed. Nevertheless, Eldredge's evenhanded and inclusive study is an important exploration of the complex social consciousness motivating Regionalist artists.

WENDY JEAN KATZ  
Department of Art and Art History  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln