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Fall 2007

## Review of *Kansas Murals: A Traveler's Guide* By Lora Jost and Dave Loewenstein

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Marling, Karal Ann, "Review of *Kansas Murals: A Traveler's Guide* By Lora Jost and Dave Loewenstein" (2007). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1443.

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*Kansas Murals: A Traveler's Guide.* By Lora Jost and Dave Loewenstein. Foreword by Saralyn Reece Hardy. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006. xvii + 278 pp. Maps, photographs, appendices, sources, index. \$35.00 cloth, \$19.50 paper.

This is a perfectly amazing little book—part toss-it-in-the-backseat tourist's guide and part scholarly tome filled with amazing facts and trenchant observations about some ninety-odd works of art embellishing various public walls, silos, grain elevators, and culverts scattered from one end of Kansas to the other. The authors, who paint murals themselves, have a delightfully catholic taste in art, too. The examples illustrated in all their luscious, technicolor glory run the gamut from community projects involving school kids and senior citizens to Beaux Arts maidens in cheesecloth borrowed from World's Fairs of the nineteenth century, to earnest New Deal paeans to honest agriculture and local history, to acknowledged masterpieces, like Kansas-born John Steuart Curry's controversial depiction of abolitionist John Brown lighting the prairie fire that would only burn itself out in the inferno of the Civil War. Given the scope and quality of these Kansas murals, one is tempted to wonder what other artistic riches lurk unnoticed upon the walls of other Great Plains states?

The Curry murals in the Kansas State Capitol (1937-42) outraged many worthy citizens of the day. Shown as a wild-eyed Moses clutching the Good Book in one hand and a rifle in the other, Brown did not, said the

Kansas Council of Women, reveal the best side of “a law-abiding, progressive state.” And furthermore, the left side of the picture was dominated by a nasty tornado headed straight for the viewer. As if MGM’s *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) had not already given the impression that Kansas was a dangerous place to visit, now Curry had intimated that the state was populated by dangerous freaks as well. Today, the authors note, the statehouse murals remind Kansans that the defining issue for which Brown fought was human equality—a problem still very much on the national agenda. But most of the other murals have been a source of unending pleasure and pride both in the making and in the seeing.

There is the mural inside the Kansas Space Center (2002), the work of sci-fi and NASA master illustrator Robert McCall. There is the surreal triptych in the Hoisington Post Office (1990) that recasts and celebrates the original mural, still on the east wall, painted in 1938 by Iowa Regionalist Dorothea Tomlinson. The new offering by one-time farmer Bob Booth celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of the older mural and suggests the changes time has wrought in Plains agriculture. There is the big panel in the lobby of Westar Energy’s headquarters in Topeka created by Thomas Hart Benton’s grandson, Anthony Benton Gude, in 1999—a history of electrical energy in Kansas based on the dynamic style of his forebear, the founder of modern Regionalist art. And more, in this delightful romp through the heart of the Great Plains beloved by Benton and Tomlinson and Gude—and all the others honored here.

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