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John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood: A Portrait of Rural America. By Joseph S. Czestochowski. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1981. Photographs, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. 224 pp. \$32.00.

This catalogue was assembled to coincide with an exhibition of "the best works" (p. 5) of two of our most famous American scene painters, Grant Wood (1892–1942) of Iowa and John Steuart Curry (1897–1946) of Kansas. The exhibition traveled, fittingly, to museums in Iowa, Missouri, and Kansas, and was very well received.

Make no mistake about it, the Midwestern Regionalists are "in": the bellwether artists—Curry, Wood, and their friend Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri—have been rescued from the obscurity to which they were consigned during the heyday of abstractionism after World War II. Mr. Czestochowski, an established museum professional and authority on American landscape painting, has contributed significantly, here and elsewhere, to the rehabilitation. But it could not have happened had not this triumvirate been what in fact they were throughout their careers—simply good artists.

In a densely packed introductory essay, Mr. Czestochowski makes that point. He also demonstrates, in tying the regionalists securely to their cultural matrix, that as painters of landscape in a more or less realistic idiom they were solidly in the American grain. They raged at European-derived "isms" (Benton); they yearned to "decentralize" American art, i.e., to get it out of New York (Wood); and—depression and dust bowl notwithstanding—they cherished the Jeffersonian ideal of the beneficence of the rural environment (Curry). Above all, they clung to the conviction "that good art could be created from scenes that the average American could readily understand because of direct experience" (p. 13).

Oddly, Mr. Czestochowski excludes Benton from his "portrait of rural America." He reasons (with irrefutable but unpersuasive logic) that the Missourian's "frame of reference was national rather than regional" and that he "lived thirty years longer than either Curry or Wood, a factor that was crucial to his perspec-

tive" (p. 12). But a three-legged stool stands uncertainly on two legs, and Mr. Czestochowski is impelled to lay in some underpinning by citing Benton continuously and by including as an Afterword (pp. 213–17) his autobiographical reflections "On Regionalism."

Other underpinning, in the consolidation of the text portion of the volume, is comprised of a perceptive analysis by Sue Kendall (pp. 34–39) of Curry's "Kansas Pastoral" (an idyllic segment of his mural cycle in the state capitol at Topeka), and reprints of two fugitive essays of 1935—Curry's "What Should the American Artist Paint?" (pp. 40–41), and Wood's "Revolt Against the City" (pp. 128–36). This miscellany of material coheres better than one might suppose. However, the catalogues raisonnés—central to publications of this sort—are a puzzle: they list only the graphic art of the two men and totally omit the paintings. We are not told why.

The plates are also a disappointment. Only seventeen are in color, and they are of middling quality. The monochrome reproductions are less black-and-white than gray and grainy. The pictures do, however, offer a generously representative sampling of the total oeuvre of Curry and Wood, and include some rarely seen items. For each artist there is also a detailed and most helpful chronology.

All things considered, Mr. Czestochowski's volume, while not rich in insight, does mix the useful and the pleasurable, and certainly it provides, as he claims in the preface, a "resource for the study and enjoyment of two of this country's most distinguished artists."

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