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Growth of an Artist

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GROWTH OF AN ARTIST

Grant Allan Kniffen, B.S.E. Art



An Abstract Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate
School of Lindenwood College in partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Art

1989

ABSTRACT

One's growth as an artist is influenced by many things. Upbringing, values, experience and skill development are among those influences. They combine to shape and mold the identity of the artist. This gradual shaping of the artist's identity eventually results in what is termed a mature style.

This Masters Exhibition is the culminating product of graduate studies in art. The accompanying thesis discusses the artist's growth and development.

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A Culminating Project Presented to the Faculty of the
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Degree of Master of Art

1989

COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY:

Professor John Wehmer,
Chairperson and advisor

Professor Dean Eckert

Adjunct Professor Grant Hargate

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1. My deep thanks and appreciation goes to the following:

1.1. My God in heaven who sustains my life and pursuits.

Jerry Thomas who taught me how to "really see" and gave me a "nuts and bolts" foundation.

Grant Hargate, Alyce Schmerhorn and John Wehmer who provided the encouragement and freedom to grow.

1.2. And very importantly to my wife Donita and my son Caleb for their love, patience, and understanding, as I was gone so often working on this degree the past three years.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is written in support of the Graduate Exhibit of Grant Kniffen and in partial fulfillment of candidacy requirements for a Master of Art Degree in Studio Art. The exhibition consists of sixty-two works: twenty are two-dimensional works and forty-two are three-dimensional. This paper describes the artistic goals and philosophies of the artist, along with a catalog of the works and a discussion of the graduate experience at Lindenwood.

This exhibition is the result of three years of concentrated work. It represents growth in the skills and techniques of an artist as well as development of my subject matter. The goals for pursuing a graduate degree at Lindenwood were three-fold. The first was to develop skills in handling new and different media, and to concentrate on the use color. The second was to gain new experience with the drawn and painted landscape, often including the figure. The third goal was to express feelings and ideas about the world through implicit content.

THE EXHIBITION

The subject of the two-dimensional work in this exhibition begins with landscape and develops into the landscape with figure(s). The oil paintings portray landscapes in a traditional manner. The drawings reflect a transition from the landscape alone to man interacting with nature and man interacting with other human beings. These drawings were created using colored pencil and pastels with a strong overall emphasis on rich color schemes and value contrast. Relief print making reflected skill development using nature as a subject.

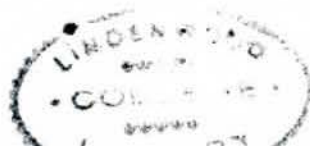
The three-dimensional work involves ceramics and ceramic sculpture. This medium was little explored before I entered graduate work. Emphasis has been placed on developing skills on the potter's wheel with some hand building.

PHILOSOPHIES AND INFLUENCES

The two-dimensional works in this exhibition reflect both a reverent outlook on nature and a romantic portrayal of man. Nature was created by God. It is amazing to view and think about its great complexity and diversity. By portraying the land in its beauty, the God who made it is honored. A view similar to this was held by a group of American landscape painters during the 1800's. James Biddle, writing the preface to John K. Howat's book, The Hudson River and Its Painters, states:

Regarding the natural landscape as a direct manifestation of God, these men attempted to record what they saw as accurately as possible. Unlike European painters who brought to their canvases the styles and techniques of centuries, the Hudson River painters sought neither to embellish nor idealize their scenes. They approached nature with reverence and portrayed it with the detailed care of a naturalist. Yet results were more than photographically accurate. "The artist as poet," explained one of their leaders, Asher Durand, "will have seen more than the mere matter of fact, but no more than is there and that another may see if it is pointed out to him." (p. 15).

The word "romantic" is used in the sense that one might look back more favorably on past generations and events than his own, thinking that the times and the people were more innocent, noble and uncorrupted than



those of today. This outlook is not necessarily correct in reality, but nonetheless is attractive.

Three major Romantic Style artists have influenced my works. The first is Charles M. Russell, the turn-of-the-century Western painter who portrayed the cowboy, Indian, and the vanishing west in a heroic light. Secondly, N. C. Weyth, an illustrator of classic adventure stories during the first half of this century, used high drama created by contrast of value, color, and composition to fuel many imaginations. More recently the work of Thomas Hart Benton, the American regionalist, has had a direct effect on my works through its subject matter and style.

The three-dimensional ceramic works have been influenced to a lesser degree by outside sources. Much of the work emphasizes skill and form development along with simple surface decoration. The pieces all reflect a strong functional nature. All are thrown on the wheel except for the hand-built ceramic sculpture.

THE CATALOG

The works in this graduate exhibition are described in the following catalog. The oil painting, "Afternoon on the Big Piney" (slide 1) represents a major advance in color. It displays a bold use of color, not exhibited in undergraduate works, which resulted from closely studying color in the works of other artists. Instead of mixing black or Payne's Gray into a color to create darkness, blues, violets, and browns were directly applied to the areas to produce rich, dark values. Several different colors were blended into the sky to create a rich effect along with enhancing the color unity of the piece. Further rich application of color is displayed in "Better Days Gone By" (slide 2). Texture was a key component of this work and is produced through layers of color achieved by underpainting.

The composition of "Happy Divergence" (slide 3) is the focus of the painting. The components are placed in a classical "S-type" composition beginning at the bottom of the painting, moving up through the falls, and finally culminating along the river behind the rocks and trees. The rocks are painted with

dulled oranges and yellows in an attempt to move away from the confines of local color.

"Inspiration Point" (slide 4) is an ideal landscape subject. It displays an influence of the Hudson River painters in its panoramic approach. The strong horizontal shape of the painting is helpful in creating the panoramic view, causing the viewer to look from side to side. This panorama, paired with the illusion of great depth, emphasizes the vastness of the creation.

"Rocky Falls" (slide 5) represents one of my first attempts at a color drawing. Drawing skills were previously used to develop compositions for paintings, and not for works in and of themselves. The colored pencils are a new and exciting medium to me. They presented the opportunity to layer many colors to create a rich scheme, yet not become "muddy." The drawing displays a growing confidence in the use of color. At this point the philosophy regarding my approach to color developed, namely that any colors can be blended and used as long as proper values are maintained. The fade-away technique in this drawing is used to create a spontaneous quality.

"Roots" (slide 6) focuses on the breakup of positive and negative space involving the light tree roots

and dark ground. The drawing provides the challenge of creating many rich, dark values. "Tribute to the Cowboy" (slide 7) pays homage to the romantic image of the American cowboy. Reflections on these famous icons recall the scenes from countless western movies and playing Cowboys and Indians as a child. The simple, yet interesting white negative space, along with sharp clarity, emphasizes the subject matter.

The recognizable and popular subject of "Fishing Time" (slide 8) serves as a study in textures. The various qualities of the objects provided the challenge of deciphering the patterns of value on the objects in order to create the textures. Bright colors on the flies are used to accent the predominant earth-tone color scheme. The purpose of "The Falls at Dawt Mill" (slide 9) is to create a picture focusing on value and contrast. Limited color is used to emphasize the value contrast. The subject of the falls aids in the picture's purpose by contrasting the whiteness of the falling water with darkness of the level water, trees, and rocks.

"Crystal Clear" (slide 10) represents the interaction of the figure into the landscape and my work. It is also the first use of pastel. While a rich color scheme is found in this pastel and the others

following, the subject matter is of prime focus. The solitary canoeist in his modern aluminum canoe conjures for this artist the romantic image of a mountain man traveling down an uncharted and unpolluted river in search of fur pelts. The drawing is executed on dark mat board so as to enhance the color intensity.

"The Storyteller" (slide 11) recalls the hours spent listening to older people tell stories of adventure and people from long ago. The drawing depicts a grandfather telling his grandson the story of Davey Crockett's encounter with a bear. Rich colors are used throughout the drawing and especially in the face and hair of the grandfather. This focuses attention on him as he "paints" his story, subtly displayed in the sky, for the mind of the boy.

"Gathering Wheat" (slide 12) is the first of a series of three colored pencil drawings created in the Regionalist style. These were produced while in the midst of research on Joseph P. Vorst, a St. Louis-based artist who was a Regionalist painter. The research into Vorst's life familiarized me more thoroughly with the Regionalist movement and the work of Thomas Hart Benton. One of the key goals of the movement was to create a distinctly American style of

art based on the rural scenes and people of Midwestern America.

The purposes of this drawing are four. The first is to depict a rural farmer gathering wheat, vintage the 1930's and 1940's. The second is to place the figure in a monumental landscape. The third is to create a very bright sense of daylight, and the last is to create very rich colors.

"Pitching Bundles" (slide 13) builds upon the same ideas as the previous drawing. In this drawing, the farmer is pitching bundles of wheat onto the wagon which represents the tools and machinery of the farmer. There is also a conscious effort to create a more stylized rhythm to the drawing in the manner of Benton. This is done to give the drawing a more expressive and animated quality.

"Two Pass Time Quicker" (slide 14) is the final drawing of the three. Two figures are introduced into this drawing. Along with achieving the previous goals, there is a continued effort to stylize the drawing in a rhythmic way.

"Years Gone By" (slide 15), created with colored pencil, does not include the figure. The drawing instead strives to personify the old barn. One is made to wonder what stories it would tell if it

could. The barn is emphasized by the contrast in color and value with the yellowed grass in the middle ground. The wagon ruts leading to the barn and the strong silhouette of the barn against the light sky also contribute to the emphasis. "Through the Years" (slide 16) also tries to personify an object--the old weathered fence post. Rhythm is the focus of "In the Country" (slide 17). This rhythm is displayed in the strong linear qualities of the road, grass, and rows of crops.

"Rocky Falls" (slide 18) is a relief print composed from the colored pencil drawing of the same name. It is the first attempt at the waste-block process. This process is very difficult because one has to determine how much or little of the block to carve away with each successive print. A purpose of this print is to create color unity by the overall placement of color throughout the work. "Azaleas" (slide 19) proved to be a somewhat less difficult task due to a less complicated color scheme and design.

"Landscape" (slide 20) is a unique expression in this show in that it is a mosaic. This medium is very fascinating because of the use of many different shaped pieces that unite to form a single composition. This technique necessitates a simplification of the

subject that would not be required of a drawing. This mosaic is created from a preliminary drawing. The pieces, all made of clay, are individually cut following the design. The pieces were then glazed in carefully chosen colors and mounted on a board. The spaces in-between were filled with black tile grout. The strong outline of the grout created a lively linear rhythm around the pieces and a look similar to stained glass. The two great challenges of this work were working with a large volume of individual pieces and achieving proper color perspective through glazes. This work is a somewhat transitional one in that it is both two-dimensional and three-dimensional at the same time.

The ceramic works in the exhibit are all functional and are made from high-fire stoneware. "Tree Lamp" (slide 21) is a hand-built floor lamp standing forty-eight inches tall. It derives from a long-held attraction to unique lamps. The subject is that of a gnarled, twisted tree, representative of the exciting shape and character of similar trees in nature.

Spontaneity and rhythm are reflected in the large pot in slide 22. The main form of the vessel is wheel-thrown and very formal. The upper portion is made from textured and torn slabs of clay attached and

manipulated to create a very spontaneous rhythm. This is enhanced by the contrast with the formal body.

Iron oxide wash was used in order to emphasize the textures in the pot, yet not distract from the form.

The vase is a very classical and graceful form. The creation of this form and the application of an exciting surface decoration are two of my goals for the vase. Slide 23 depicts an early vase that achieves a graceful contrast between the wide body and the narrower neck. The salt glaze appearance is actually a happy accident which occurred during a normal glaze firing.

Slide 24 depicts a group of four vases similar in size and shape. Three of the vases display an unglazed band colored with iron oxide. The bands create an interesting contrast of glazed and unglazed surfaces, and give a more "polished" look to the pieces. These bands, whether flat or multi-grooved, have become signature marks on almost all of the works created since this early period.

Slides 25, 26, 27, and 28 all represent vases with varying degrees of decoration using the unglazed band. Glaze treatment varies from simple, formal design (slide 27) to a more spontaneous approach (slide 28). "Pot with Tree Branch" (slide 29) is a

direct attempt at reconciling my three-dimensional, wheel-thrown forms with the strong nature subjects of the two-dimensional works.

Slide 30 shows a large pot that was created to experience using a large quantity of clay and throwing it into a single vessel eleven inches tall and nine inches in diameter. The very formal shape is contrasted by the very spontaneous application of glaze below the neck.

Slide 31 depicts a large container which is one of the early attempts at adding lids and handles to a piece, a procedure which demands a higher level of skill than one piece forms. The glaze decoration on the pot is used to create an interest in the piece beyond its functional use. The four-piece canister set in slide 32 was thrown for the challenge of creating a set. The body forms are not alike, though they are similar, which makes them more interesting to look at as a group. The handles, lids, and glaze decoration work to unite the pieces.

Slide 33 shows a two-piece, four-setting dinnerware set. The challenge in throwing these is to make the plates and bowls alike. Slide 34 is a close-up of one plate and one bowl. The dinnerware is decorated

with a tree branch motif recalling the two-dimensional work.

The platter in slide 35 also carries the tree branch motif. Platters are interesting to the potter because of the large available surface and its potential for decoration. Platters can be used for display purposes in themselves, as well as the more common functional use.

The final series of pieces includes three soup tureen and bowl sets. These display an effective use of the tree branch motif on the handles. The first tureen and bowl set (slide 36) displays a simple decoration with the signature unglazed band. The bowls are matching due to the similar, unglazed bands and glaze decoration. The final two tureens (slides 37 and 38) are glazed in similar fashion to each other, creating a more ornate quality than has the first tureen. The glazing combination is based on the pot in slide 31.

EVALUATION

The graduate experience at Lindenwood has been very meaningful. The great freedom and flexibility of the curriculum and the instructors has provided the opportunity for much growth. This atmosphere was very helpful and non-threatening as I set out to achieve my artistic goals.

This was especially true in the development of the two-dimensional work. The use of colored pencil and pastel were relatively new mediums of expression and needed much experimentation. Through this process much was learned about the creation of rich color schemes. In addition to the use of new art mediums the content of the subject matter expanded with the inclusion of the figure. The figure will be a central focus in my future works as I continue the portrayal of rural subjects and eventually progress to creating works in historical contexts. There is a great desire to apply the information gained regarding color and portrayal of subject to other media such as oil and watercolor, the latter of which was the major focus of undergraduate work.

The medium of relief printing is also very exciting. The experience at Lindenwood in this area has

furthered my interest in print making. Future goals are to work larger in size and gain a greater confidence in the printing process in order to create more intricate and challenging compositions.

Work with ceramics opened a whole new area of expression in three dimensions. Most of my ceramic knowledge has been gained at Lindenwood, and has strongly focused on the development of technique. Aesthetically pleasing, functional pottery will continue to be a goal of the wheel-thrown pieces since there is still much to be learned and accomplished in this area. Further, hand building offers the opportunity to create sculpture.

Fulfillment of the graduate history requirements provided the opportunity to do original research. A unique opportunity presented itself at Lindenwood to do research into the life of Joseph Paul Vorst, a German immigrant and artist based in St. Louis during the 1930's and 1940's. Vorst was not well known in the art historical sense, resulting in little knowledge of the man to be found in books. I had the privilege of helping Carl Vorst, Joseph's son, and his wife discover and put together the life and accomplishments of his father, who died when Carl was four. There was much information available on Joseph, both

in documents found in old, musty boxes-- untouched for forty years--and in his surviving works. The objective of the research was to discover and put together history from original sources, which required great discipline and hundreds of hours of diligent work. It also helped to develop a confidence in writing that was largely nonexistent before this time.

Great discipline was required to do well in the graduate experience. This discipline manifested itself most clearly during the summer courses. Work had to be done every day for many hours at a time. This highly intensified approach provided the opportunity to gain the most knowledge and experience from every medium, and allowed for a considerable volume of work to be done. Each day brought new information and chances to apply knowledge and experience immediately, rather than allowing it to linger over weeks or even months until the next opportunity presented itself.

The graduate experience at Lindenwood has been very satisfying. It allowed the opportunity to explore directions of greater self-fulfillment. The knowledge gained has provided the stepping stones for further growth and exploration. My goal is to remain an active, productive artist, open to new growth and learning.

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SLIDE REGISTRY

<u>Slide</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Dimensions</u>	<u>Medium</u>
1	"Afternoon on the Big Piney"	24"x30"	Oil
2	"Better Days Gone By"	12"x18"	Oil
3	"Happy Divergence"	22"x20"	Oil
4	"Inspiration Point"	22½"x46"	Oil
5	"Rocky Falls"	19"x24"	Colored Pencil
6	"Roots"	24"x19"	Colored Pencil
7	"Tribute to the Cowboy"	19"x24"	Colored Pencil
8	"Fishing Time"	24"x19"	Colored Pencil
9	"The Falls at Dawt Mill"	19"x24"	Colored Pencil
10	"Crystal Clear"	14"x40"	Pastel
11	"The Storyteller"	32"x40"	Pastel
12	"Gathering Wheat"	24"x19"	Colored Pencil
13	"Pitching Bundles"	24"x19"	Colored Pencil
14	"Two Pass Time Quicker"	19"x24"	Colored Pencil
15	"Years Gone By"	19"x24"	Colored Pencil
16	"Through the Years"	13"x12"	Colored Pencil

<u>Slide</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Dimensions</u>	<u>Medium</u>
17	"In the Country"	12"x19"	Colored Pencil
18	"Rocky Falls"	10½"x13¼"	Relief Print
19	"Azaleas"	8"x8"	Relief Print
20	"Landscape"	23"x44"	Ceramic Tile
21	"Tree Lamp"	48"x30"x22"	Ceramic
22	"Spontaneous Pot"	17"x12"x12"	Ceramic
23	"Vase"	7"x6"	Ceramic
24	"Four Vases"	7¼"x5" 6"x4" 6½"x4 ¾" 6 ¾"x5"	Ceramic
25	"Vase"	7 ¾"x6½"	Ceramic
26	"Vase"	9"x7½"	Ceramic
27	"Vase"	7 ¾"x6½"	Ceramic
28	"Vase"	6½"x5½"	Ceramic
29	"Pot with Tree Branch"	7"x9"x6"	Ceramic
30	"Large Pot"	11"x9½"	Ceramic
31	"Pot with Lid and Handles"	11"x10½"x8½"	Ceramic
32	"Four Canisters"	10"x9"x6" 8½"x9"x8" 9"x9"x7" 9"x9"x6"	Ceramic
33	"Dinnerware Set"		Ceramic
34	"Plate and Bowl"	1"x10½" 2"x6½"	Ceramic

<u>Slide</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Dimensions</u>	<u>Medium</u>
35	"Platter"	1 3/4"x13"	Ceramic
36	"Tureen and Four Bowls"	9 1/2"x14"x10 1/2" 2 3/4"x7 1/2"	Ceramic
37	"Tureen"	10 1/2"x12"x10 1/2"	Ceramic
38	"Tureen"	10 1/2"x9"x8"	Ceramic