"A visual, intellectual and emotional legacy at Iowa State" is how Lynette Pohlman describes the sculpture of Christian Petersen (1885-1961). Pohlman is director of the University Museums at Iowa State University in Ames, where an exhibit, a book, and an array of events this fall celebrate the artistic achievements and energy of Petersen, as well as the restoration and conservation of his work by Iowa State.

Born in 1885 in Dybbol, Denmark, Petersen immigrated to America as a child. His early training and work in die-cutting, design, intaglio engraving, and sculpture all took place on the East Coast, but by the late 1920s he had moved to Chicago and was receiving medallion and portrait commissions in Iowa. In 1934, he was invited to Iowa by Grant Wood, project director for the New Deal’s Public Works of Art Project, and from then until his death in 1961, Iowa State University was the base of his prolific career as the first campus sculptor-in-residence in the United States.

The following pages briefly sketch the story behind some of Petersen’s most well-known and beloved sculptures on the Iowa State campus. The text appears here with the permission of Iowa State University Press and is adapted from Christian Petersen, Sculptor (ISU Press, September 2000). The complete story of Petersen’s career is told in the book, as well as in the retrospective exhibit at ISU’s Brunnier Art Museum. (For details, see the box on page 96.)

CHRISTIAN PETERSEN, SCULPTOR

by Lea Rossen DeLong

with an introduction by Charles C. Eldredge

The sculpture of Christian Petersen has been long admired by visitors to Iowa State University, with which he began his long association as sculptor-in-residence in 1934. Yet, his art remains unfamiliar to many other Americans today, even to specialists in the subject.

In his proclivity for midwestern motifs, the sculptor conformed to the principles enumerated decades earlier by another Iowan, author-and-critic Hamlin Garland, who advised American artists that “art, to be vital, must be local in its subject.”

Like Garland, Petersen envisioned the flourishing of “an American art, here in the Midwest, where America has its roots. Here,” he predicted in 1934, “shall be the soil, and the seed, and the strength of art.” During the difficult years of the Depression, the agricultural college in Ames provided not only salary (albeit meager), but also inspiration. “I figured I could reach people here that I couldn’t get to in a university with art courses,” he confessed; “I have always found the keenest appreciation of my efforts has been by men and women whose work calls for some use of the hands.”

He might have preferred fine stone or bronze, or yet rarer stuff; but, during the Depression, his precarious financial situation and that of Iowa State College precluded such luxuries. Instead, Petersen worked in humbler materials, generally carved limestone or modelling plaster or terra cotta fired from local clays.

He drew inspiration from his observations of rural life and newsworthy events of the day. These images drawn from his own time and place appealed to the art-

“W hen a chisel finally fits your hand,” Christian Petersen once said, “it is just a matter of learning the nature of the different materials—and using them to put forth your ideas.” Right: Petersen works on The Gentle Doctor, 1937.
ist and to his hard-working Iowa neighbors.

Given the campus location of his studio in the veterinary quadrangle, animals not surprisingly entered his repertoire of subjects. His former students recalled their teacher sending them from the studio out to the vet barns to draw from the live (animal) models. Their availability and their significance to the school's agricultural curriculum, as well as to the state's economy, made them ready motifs.

In his monuments for the Iowa State University campus, as well as in his independent studio works, Christian Petersen left a legacy that documents his own personal vision . . . [and also] the competing forces that flourished in American sculpture during an important transitional period.

—Charles C. Eldredge

Petersen seems to have been the only professional sculptor on the Iowa [Public Works of Art] Project—in fact, one of the very few in the Midwest who did not work in Chicago—and the only one who produced any sculpture that can still be identified. In addition, he was older than most of the other artists (including Wood), had lived and worked in the East, and had already established his reputation. Finally, he appears to be the only participant who parlayed his opportunities on the Iowa Project into a permanent job. In contrast to the primary task of the Iowa project—murals for the library at Iowa State—Petersen's was not a group job, or as it might have been termed in Iowa at the time, a cooperative project. He alone was assigned to work on the dairy sculpture cycle, and the responsibility for its success was his alone.

The six panels [of the dairy mural] were installed three on each side of a center panel whose depth extended out of the low relief into nearly freestanding in the heads of three Jersey cows who stretch out of the flattened panel.
toward an actual pool of water from which they seem to drink [see left]. The sophisticated trompe l’oeil effect that Petersen achieved here demonstrated not only his knowledge of art history but also his ability to adapt it to an Iowa subject. The series of sculptures is one side of an outdoor “room” bordered by terraces, plantings, and other buildings. Sensitivity to the site of his sculpture was an enduring characteristic of Petersen’s as, over the years, he added a long series of outdoor sculptures to the campus. In every case, his designs took account of both the natural and the man-made aspects of the environment into which he would place his work. The inclusion of the pool in the dairy complex was the first of several instances in which Petersen would integrate water into his schemes for campus monuments.

Over the next twenty years, Christian Petersen created six more public sculptures for the Iowa State campus, . . . [and] produced many other sculptures related to Iowa State or on other subjects at the same time that he maintained a constant stream of portrait busts and plaques. During these years, he was also a popular teacher whose classes each quarter were full to overflowing, making increasing demands on his time and energy. When he began, only women students were allowed into the sculpture course (because they were offered through the home economics curriculum), but by spring of 1939, men joined the classes.

While Petersen was still working on the dairy courtyard reliefs in 1935, the college was renovating its gymnasium, known as State Gym. When the dairy sculptures were finished and installed (and while he was developing the concepts for the veterinary complex), he inserted into the new staircase front of the building three reliefs of college athletes in action [see above]. In all the figures, this quality of formality and stateliness comes from the sharp carving and bold outline of forms that do not just capture a moment in these athletic contests, but distill motions and poses so characteristic that they can typify an entire sport.

In the spring of 1935, Petersen began developing ideas for his next major campus sculpture. The dean of veterinary medicine, Charles H. Stange, had requested a work of
art for the veterinary complex, and during the summer of 1935, his discussions with Petersen helped the sculptor formulate the theme for a large sculptural panel. With help of his wife, Charlotte, Petersen acquainted himself with the history and recent developments in veterinary science, then composed an active scene of sturdy men and farm animals. Like the dairy sculptures, it was also to be a relief, but this time a single panel, not broken into seven separate scenes. Nothing of its size was produced in Iowa or perhaps in the entire Midwest during the 1930s. In proposing his new sculpture to the college administration, Petersen described the primary theme as “the protection of human health by guarding animal health through the development of vaccines.”

In the center panel, stands a spirited horse, flexing his muscles and bending his head down sharply as if on the verge of rearing up [see detail below]. The musculature of the shirtless man and the arch of his back as he strains to subdue the horse suggest that man and animal are equal contenders in this contest for dominance. Widespread legs planted on the ground, the man wraps his right arm over the shoulder of the horse as his left firmly tugs back on a bridle in the horse’s mouth. The tone of struggle, of muscle against muscle, will against will, of these two massive and central forms is in contrast to the studious concentration of the vet who withdraws the horse’s blood. This theme of struggle was one that hovered over a good deal of art in the 1930s, and in no other work does Petersen express so clearly that feature of his times. For all of the vigor that courses across the panel, it is typical of much public, especially federal, sculpture of its time in that there is little aggressive emotion displayed, but rather a grim, determined, and concentrated focus on the task at hand. The emotional tone is expressed mainly through the action of the body. Much of Petersen’s sculpture possesses a calm, steady, even introspective air, but this panel is lively and animated, full of quickened postures and tense contests.

The central figures of the tall, powerful, muscular horse and the man who battles to contain him dominate the entire panel. They are bracketed by two groups who kneel or bend to execute their procedures: the two men with the calf on the left and, to the right, two other men who vaccinate a hog.

At an early point in the realization of this sculpture panel, Petersen conceived the idea of a figure to accompany the relief panel and expand the space to create an entire sculptural envi-
ronment. Considering the scientific rigor of the themes on the panel and the tone of contention as the men submitted the animals to various procedures, Petersen may have wanted to "humanize" the profession somewhat. His solution was to present an individual, a figure who seemed to have an identity and was not just a participant in a scientific crusade for the health and betterment of men and animals. He worked through a number of designs that showed a veterinarian coming to the aid of an ailing family pet, sometimes accompanied by a concerned child. In the end, he settled upon a stalwart but sympathetic man dressed in plain clothes and a lab coat, holding a sick puppy while the mother dog worries at his feet. The doctor cradles the limp puppy in two oversize hands as he gazes down at it with both compassion and competence. The mother leans against his lower leg, her head lifted mournfully toward her pup.

The sculpture is the simplest composition Petersen had so far developed, and has been purged of any hint of his early Beaux Arts style. Compared with the animation and complexity of the relief, the figure is almost stark in the economy of its modeling.

The Gentle Doctor gradually became a symbol of the college and is often regarded as a symbol of the overall profession. A 1941 article in Veterinary Student praised the sculpture as typifying "the fine type of men who made up our Veterinary profession today."
Cornhusker was modeled after husking champion Marion Link. "Sometimes people think I'm staring at them," Petersen once told a reporter, "but all I'm doing is gaining material."

Like the country doctor, he is motivated by the spirit to serve humbly and to save life.

In 1941, as the country was pulling out of the Depression, Petersen produced two sculptures that address farm life, which are among the few instances at the time of a Midwestern artist taking up this theme in sculpture. Cornhusker is based on a scene witnessed by Petersen and described by his friend in agricultural journalism, Charles Rogers.

“One bright October afternoon on a farm near Nevada, Iowa,” [Rogers wrote], “spectators at a corn husking contest watched the nimble, smoothly articulating form of a neighbor boy move rhythmically up and down the rows to win the first leg of a contest which was to carry him to the state championship and runner-up in the National.

“The artist, Sculptor Christian Petersen, had seen what others saw, though no doubt, with his practiced sculptor’s eyes, he saw a good deal more. He followed Marion through the contest, making careful mental notes. That evening, while the memory of Marion’s fine athletic body was still fresh in his mind, he went to the studio and made the quick sketch in clay. Later Petersen persuaded Marion to pose in the studio, and then he completed this statue.”

4-H Calf [see right] is a subject that Petersen must have observed many times as he did sculpture demonstrations at the Iowa State Fair. Here, an adolescent farm boy studiously positions his calf. The title suggests that this is not a farmyard scene but one in which the boy is showing his animal for judging at a fair. Though it does not have the abstracted simplification of the relief cattle in the dairy panels, it is still a very plain, unelaborated form, a description that could also apply in comparing the boy with the adult men who work to control their animals in the veterinary panel.

In producing sculptures on these themes, Petersen had little company among artists of the Depression era who were not working in federal programs. Even in those programs, however, relatively few freestanding sculptures (compared to the number of paintings) that depict the life of the farmer appear to have been created and preserved. Petersen’s works are among the few that could be fitted into the regionalist program although, like most artists who found that term applied to them, he preferred not to be so narrowly labeled.

The most prominent [Petersen sculpture] on campus is a work so frequently encountered that it has become one of the identifying

Petersen’s 4-H Calf, like Cornhusker, is painted plaster. Both were recently donated to ISU.
images of the University. The *Fountain of the Four Seasons*, 1940-41, is placed at the entrance to the Memorial Union, the center of student life. According to Petersen’s biographer, Patricia L. Bliss, it began with a call from President Charles Friley, who had grown exasperated with the situation of the fountain in front of Memorial Union. A gift of the 1936 VEISHEA Central Committee, the fountain was the frequent target of jokesters, and the president wished the sculptor to transform it into something that would discourage such pranks.

Petersen took as his inspiration a subject he had explored thoroughly only a few years earlier. In 1936, he had illustrated *Cha-Ki-Shi*, a children’s book on the Meskwaki Indians of Iowa, and had spent time at their Tama settlement. Deciding he would like to continue this theme of Native Americans, he consulted with his geneticist-poet friend J. C. Cunningham, who shared that interest. The professor soon supplied a four-line Osage chant:

> Lo, I come to the tender planting  
> Lo, a tender shoot breaks forth  
> Lo, I collect the golden harvest  
> Lo, there is joy in my house

Employing the original fountain as his centerpiece, Petersen designed a circular pool with an Indian woman placed at each of the four directions, picturing each of the lines of the chant. In his visualization of the first three lines, Petersen chose the grain most closely associated not only with Indians, but with Iowa and the agricultural curriculum of Iowa State as well: corn.

Petersen’s next project, on the grounds in front of the home economics building, was also his most metaphorical public work. Dealing again with water, he designed a large, round, shallow pool ringed by a low concrete band that rises less than a foot from ground level. Playing at water’s edge along the south side of the circle are three small figures of children, all around three years
of age. Entitled The Marriage Ring [see above], the children symbolize the fruits, or the "jewels" of marriage, thus illustrating metaphorically the goal of the home economics program. This curriculum, restricted to women, taught them the skills of successful homemaking, often with an emphasis on the needs of children. Tellingly, the work is also known as The Wedding Ring and The Ring of Life.

By 1944, Petersen must have been well enough acquainted with the losses caused by the war to produce a sculpture [see right] that is particularly moving in its immediacy. Although he gave it a metaphorical title—Price of Victory—the image is disturbingly real. Petersen depicts an American soldier at the moment of death, as he is struck by a bullet. With his body already sagging toward the earth, one arm is drawn to his chest while the other hangs by his side, unable now to break the fall which will come in the next instant. The face is not agonized or contorted, but hovers between awareness and unconsciousness. Petersen must have sent a photograph of the piece to [friend and designer] George Nerney and asked if he had any suggestions about it. Nerney replied, "I judge... that it would stir the feeling of anyone so deeply that it ought to be of some great use to assist those boys who are giving up so much for us. It has so much that you have told so simply and so strongly." According to Petersen's first biographer, the sculpture did affect those who saw it, for when it was shown in the Gold Star Hall of the Memorial Union after the war ended, college administrators were asked to take it off display. "The statue apparently had created too much grief for those who had seen it, particularly persons who had lost a loved one in combat." Upon learning of the reaction, Petersen reportedly commented, "It is the greatest compliment ever paid to my work." ✤

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FOR MORE INFORMATION


The retrospective exhibit on Christian Petersen runs until December 31, 2000, at the Brunnier Art Museum, Scheman Building, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011. For information on the exhibit, lectures, and other events: 515-294-3342, or on the web at www.museums.iastate.edu.

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Price of Victory was completed in 1944.