

## Christian Petersen Remembered

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settled, developed, and bustling West must have been very unsettling to those who imagined a free and unbounded West. But western commercial clubs and boosters must have been very proud. Of course, there were problems in the maturing West of Stimson's time that were not addressed in these beautifully executed pictures of a proud western people. Two wests existed at the turn of the century. One was modern, energetic, and nearly urban in outlook and development. The other was isolated, rural, and filled with hardship, a world without access to culture, amenities, or dependable livelihoods. Although Stimson photographed the agricultural sector, his views depicted nicely developed, prosperous farms with crops in full flower. The West of struggle and failure existed at the time but does not appear here. Of course, even westerners who had failed did not necessarily want the image of the successful West of hope and opportunity, which matched their aspirations if not their circumstances, sullied by their disappointments. Stimson presented a picture of the West as westerners wished to be seen.

Another problem faced by the mature West was the issue of colonialism. With economic development came outside money and outside control. While the mature West provided jobs in industry, mining, and the railroads, loss of local autonomy and stability became a real issue. During flush times in the national economy, the West happily filled its role as a national economic asset. When downturns occurred, as they did with some regularity, the West slipped into regional pauperism. The realization of regimentation and outside control clashed with the official western ideology of individualism, freedom, and self-improvement. Stimson's lens did not capture this ambivalence, reflecting instead a West moving full face forward and full steam ahead. Where Butcher honored the homesteaders' achievements in the face of defeat, Stimson honored the boosters' aspirations in the face of reality.

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*Christian Petersen Remembered*, by Patricia Lounsbury Bliss. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1986. xvi, 217 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$24.95 cloth.

This biography of the sculptor associated with Iowa State University is the author's tribute to his memory and his works. From the early 1930s until his death in 1961, Christian Petersen produced monumental and relief sculptures for the Ames campus and carried out many portrait busts and reliefs. As Bliss notes, his position as sculptor-in-residence was one of the earliest artist-in-residence situations in America. She

details the background of such well-known pieces as the "Gentle Veterinarian" and the "Boy and Girl" of the library and offers an exhaustive compilation of his known works. Petersen's effectiveness as a teacher is attested to largely through the memories of his former students, and his career is further documented by the many black-and-white illustrations scattered throughout the text. (All illustrations are in black and white and are of uneven quality.) Bliss's major sources were the Christian Petersen Papers in the ISU Library and the collection and recollections of Charlotte Garvey Petersen, the sculptor's wife. The author includes a number of hitherto unpublished writings by Petersen as well as excerpts from his lectures and his commentary on Grant Wood. Bliss asserts his importance as a sculptor and discusses his role as a Regionalist. A technical writer for technology concerns, she states in her foreword that her study is not intended as a "scholarly art history nor a critical appraisal" but as "a narrative story and biographical reporting effort" (xii).

The author traces the Danish-born sculptor's life from his beginnings as an artist-craftsman and student of the nineteenth-century American academic sculptor Henry Hudson Kitson without dealing directly with the question of formative artistic influences. He worked for about twenty years at the precise, exacting job of die-cutting, earning a comfortable living and accepting sculpture commissions on the side, before turning to sculpture full time on the eve of the depression. He joined Grant Wood's Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) in Iowa City in 1934 and was assigned to carve relief sculptures for the dairy building courtyard at Iowa State.

At this point, one encounters the most problematic feature of his career. The linear, diagrammatic and regularized structure of these carvings differs sharply from the looser, clearly hand-modeled pieces he had been producing. The dairy reliefs seem highly influenced by if not actually imitative of Grant Wood's painting, but Bliss offers no explanation for this striking change in style. Wood's role here needs to be clarified: did he specifically ask Petersen to keep the dairy sculptures in harmony with the murals he designed for the library, or was the influence more subtle, with Petersen trying to adapt to the style of the powerful and popular artist? The latter approach would not be difficult to understand, considering Wood's strict control of the project in Iowa. The only statement Wood made about the reliefs, according to Charlotte Petersen, was a negative one (he thought the relief should have been higher). Yet, the sculptures carry the mark of Wood's approach to form and are undeniably affected by his style. (One interesting comparison is with John Bloom's 1940 Fine Arts Section mural, "Cattle," in Tipton, Iowa. Bloom had been a student of Wood's and was certainly

influenced by him but it seems possible that he also admired Petersen's work.)

One of the strengths of Bliss's report is the careful detailing of the technical challenges of the dairy sculptures and the recounting of the circumstances of this and later works such as the veterinary sculptures. Petersen went on to teach and create numerous sculptures for the campus that interpret and celebrate college life. The author discusses most of the major pieces and his academic career without suggesting how, if at all, his style changed or developed. She does relate the tenor of Petersen's years at ISU and lauds the artist's steady, unassuming but persevering devotion to his work.

Bliss's book is carefully researched and easily read, but is flawed by the omission of any stylistic analysis of the works themselves. Works are often described as "superb" or "magnificent" without any explanations to justify that judgment. Bliss stated that she would not attempt such a task, but to fail to deal with such questions at all is to leave out the most important part of an artist's life. It makes her book less serious and useful than it could have been. Petersen's role in Regionalism is not clear, though the midwestern character of works such as "The Cornhusker" is unmistakable. The extent to which he subscribed to Wood's Regionalist philosophy and his relationship to other artists of the area need to be discussed. Bliss often refers to the sculptor's antagonism towards modern art, yet Petersen's work was obviously strongly influenced by that style, as shown by the simplicity, economy of form, and truth to materials found in such works as "Saint Bernard," the 1950 "Head of Christ," and the Roberts Hall reliefs. In fact, his style is inconceivable in any era other than the modern. Bliss relies heavily on the recollections and judgments of Charlotte Petersen and seems to accept without question her assessments of her husband's art and career.

*Christian Petersen Remembered* provides an important first step in the scholarly study of this midwestern sculptor. Bliss's research has brought together from a variety of sources a cohesive record of his career and has also contributed a clear picture of the affection with which Petersen was regarded both as an artist and an individual. Future scholarship will turn to this book for the outline and basic story of his career. Petersen's work undoubtedly merits further study to assess the character and significance of his art and to measure his achievement.

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