

BOOK REVIEWS

Minnesota Modern: Four Artists of the Twentieth Century

Moira F. Harris, Brian Szott, and Ben Gessner

(Afton, MN: Afton Press, 2015. 181 p. Cloth, \$45.00.)

In *Minnesota Modern*, authors Moira Harris, Brian Szott, and Ben Gessner deliver a long-overdue history of the careers of four Minnesota artists who helped shape a midwestern aesthetic in the early-to-mid-twentieth century. Dewey Albinson, Cameron Booth, Clement Haupers, and Elof Wedin became established during the Great Depression and between the two world wars, when the art world was perched between American scene painting and abstraction. Against this historical backdrop, this volume has a two-fold mission: First, it seeks to characterize the artists' signature style, which weaves together compositional elements of modernist painting and the rich fabric of Minnesota's landscape, culture, and people. Second, the authors place these artists within a larger art-historical context by examining their European influences, their educations, both local and abroad, their leadership in national programs (such as the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project), and their influence on the next generation of Minnesota artists. *Minnesota Modern* establishes the importance of these men regionally and nationally.

Four essays—one for each of the artists—strike a delicate balance between scholarly examination and approachable journalism. With strong research, extensive footnotes, and context provided by other historians, art critics, and the artists themselves, each essay also includes anecdotes that give insight into each artist's character. Harris, for instance, mentions Albinson's accidental involvement in charting land along the Pigeon River near Grand Portage for the Minnesota Historical Society. She also notes his interest in making his own paint colors, varnishes, tools, and frames. In her chapter on Booth, she tells the story of the artist's near-commission for the Coca-Cola Company. Szott's and Gessner's chapter on Haupers includes an entertaining postscript: artist LeRoy Neiman jovially recalls an afternoon of *plein-air* painting with Haupers, who had forgotten to bring his brushes. For his own postscript to his essay on Wedin, Szott reminisces with one of the artist's students, who reveals the best painting technique he ever taught her. These asides humanize the artists and give the book broad appeal not only to history buffs, art enthusiasts, and artists, but to "everyday" readers, too.

The authors' stylistic analyses create the most compelling passages in this book. Harris highlights Booth's return at the end of his life to painting equine subjects, comparing them to similar compositions from his earliest years as an artist. (Unfortunately, she does not elaborate, leaving readers to draw their own conclusions from her keen observations.) Szott and Gessner explore the influence of Haupers' longtime part-

ner and fellow painter, Clara Mairs, successfully arguing that Haupers' "strength as an artist shines in his portraits." Szott engagingly explores Wedin's midcentury development toward abstraction. Employing well-placed images of Wedin's paintings, he demonstrates how the artist adjusted his palette and fragmented his compositions until recognizable forms were completely eliminated.

Szott's discussion of Wedin's two preparatory sketches for his 1960s oil painting, *The Blue Road*, presents an especially clear example of this technique.

The strength of the essays in *Minnesota Modern* is supported by the book's design. More than 185 color images of artwork illustrate the text, in addition to historic photographs (favorites include an image of a young Albinson painting from a canoe and one of Booth posing with an earlier self-portrait). Astoundingly, many of the featured artworks can be found in local collections, including the Minnesota Historical Society, Minnesota Museum of American Art, and Weisman Art Museum. The preface, by Minnesota collectors John and Colles Larkin, offers their unique perspective as early fans of these artists. They also give fascinating insights into how they became friends to and collectors of the four painters. Finally, while the omission of women artists may seem like a significant oversight, the publisher considers *Minnesota Modern* to be a companion volume to its 2011 release, Julie L'Enfant's *Pioneer Modernists: Minnesota's First Generation of Women Artists*. Together, these texts cover the influential careers of this state's most talented artists.

—Nicole Watson



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