

***Work and Leisure in Mid-Century Missouri:
The Scruggs-Vandervoort-Barney Heart of
the Nation Collection***

Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri and the
Montminy Gallery, Boone County History and Culture Center
Curated by Kristin Schwain, Lorinda Bradley, and Mary Karcher
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For the first time in seventy years, paintings from the Missouri: Heart of the Nation collection were presented to the public as an art collection in the Montminy Gallery's 2023 exhibition *Work and Leisure in Mid-Century Missouri: The Scruggs-Vandervoort-Barney Heart of the Nation Collection*.¹ In 1946 Reeves Lewenthal of the Associated American Artists initiated a commission on behalf of the St. Louis-based department store Scruggs, Vandervoort & Barney. Fourteen artists were tasked with depicting the people and places of Missouri, and Missouri: Heart of the Nation is the result. The goal of this initiative was to put fine art in the hands of the American people. As such, the ninety-eight figurative drawings and paintings of rural landscapes,

urban industries, and tourist attractions were used as decor in the Scruggs, Vandervoort & Barney storefront and mass-produced as fine art prints. However, as the exhibition successfully demonstrated, the Missouri: Heart of the Nation collection did not serve the entire Missouri public and was intended for a specific audience, one that was white and middle- to upper-class.

At first glance, paintings in *Work and Leisure in Mid-Century Missouri* evoked nostalgia. Viewers found themselves immersed in a warm sunny day in Nicolai Cikovsky's *Missouri Botanical Garden, St. Louis* (1946) or driving down Missouri's winding country roads where they would encounter quarries like those in Ernest Fiene's *Lead and Zinc Mining, Joplin*

(1947). But this quaint reminiscence was brought to a crashing halt as viewers were asked to reflect on the social and racial tensions in mid-twentieth-century Missouri brought out in the wall text, a key factor in the exhibition's success.

It was evident that the show's organizers faced various challenges in presenting a sizeable academic collection in a contemporary gallery space. *Missouri: Heart of the Nation* is part of the permanent collection of the Museum of Art and Archaeology (MAA) at the University of Missouri (MU) in Columbia, but the museum has remained closed since July 2022 as it undergoes renovations. In a desire to bring part of the MAA's collection to the public during this time, the museum collaborated with the Montminy Gallery, a contemporary art gallery situated within the Boone County History and Culture Center. As a smaller contemporary art space, the Montminy Gallery demanded an effective curatorial strategy, which the exhibition's curators accomplished by placing a small portion of the collection's paintings in conversation with each other. Of the thirty paintings in the collection's ninety-plus works, roughly twenty oil paintings were chosen for this exhibition. Those paintings were then organized into five sections or

themes: "Missouri: Heart of the Nation," "Postwar Missouri Life," "Scruggs, Vandervoort & Barney," "The Artists," and "The Associated American Artists." Each section included three to eight paintings, respectively divided among five of the gallery's six walls. On the sixth wall, a short film was projected about *Missouri: Heart of the Nation's* history, describing the collection's transition from MU's administrative building to the MAA in 2014.

Arranging the paintings in five sections allowed the curators to maximize the gallery space; it also influenced other curatorial decisions, including the exhibition's didactic materials. The show did not use extended labels, which often accompany artworks in museum exhibitions, and instead relied exclusively on thematic text panels positioned at the beginning of each section. Each of the exhibition's five text panels explained the *Missouri: Heart of the Nation* collection's inception, production, display, dissemination, and reception, as well as the works' subjects. Eliminating a conventional museum interpretation strategy—the extended label—may seem unorthodox for a collection with deep historical roots. However, this curatorial choice contributed to the show's efficacy. Viewers were introduced to the collection's

sociocultural context first, and then were invited to contemplate the artworks' subtle implications, unencumbered by additional label text.

At times, the curators' statements directed the audience toward a particular interpretation. In the exhibition section "Postwar Missouri Life," four paintings depicting scenes ranging from a rural farm to urban industries and city leisure suggested an idyllic rural Missouri. The exhibition text addressed the racial and gendered undertones evident in these works. Lawrence Beall Smith's *Canning and Button Art, State Fair, Sedalia* (1946), for example, portrays a white woman shopping for canned goods. The wall text described how women were essential figures in Missouri's workforce but were consistently depicted as consumers instead of active contributors.

While "Postwar Missouri Life" drew attention to specific social biases, other section texts allowed individuals to draw their own conclusions. The "Scruggs, Vandervoort & Barney" section focused on the relationship between department stores and fine art in the mid-twentieth century. It explained how department stores frequently used fine art's high status to elevate their own prestige. Using the arts as an arbiter of taste appealed to Scruggs, Vandervoort

& Barney's predominately white middle- to upper-class audience but dismissed those who did not fit this identity, particularly Black Americans, who constituted a large portion of St. Louis's population at this time. The exhibition emphasized this point by showing another work by Smith, *Note from St. Louis* (1947). Smith's painting juxtaposes working-class America with upper-class America: a young Black child is shown holding a shoe-shining kit and standing before an ornate public fountain sculpture. The dichotomy was not lost on viewers encountering the work in 2023, and one wonders what viewers of the mid-twentieth century would have thought. While they can idly enjoy the painting's portrayal of the young child, he can only take a brief moment from his work obligations to appreciate the fountain's beauty. Since works such as this one from Missouri: Heart of the Nation appeared in leisure spaces (e.g., the Scruggs, Vandervoort & Barney department store) for predominately white Americans, Black Americans like the young boy pictured in Smith's painting did not often have the economic means or social privilege to access these places.

As a whole, the exhibition demonstrated the intricacies and complexities of Missouri's political, social, and cultural landscape, but

it also celebrated the regional Midwest art style of the 1940s. The artists commissioned by Scruggs, Vandervoort & Barney made up the largest wall of the exhibition. Most of these artists experienced the social power and effects of Depression-era public art sponsored by federal programs such as the Works Progress Administration and Federal Art Program in the 1930s and 40s. The exhibition holistically showcased the different aesthetic modes—Realism, Regionalism, Modernism, and Social Realism—that the artists embraced. Missouri artist Frederick Emanuel Shane exemplified the Regionalist style in *The Old Cemetery (Ste. Genevieve)* (1946) while others, including Frederick E. Conway, highlighted more Modern qualities like divided planes and bright colors in *Grand and Olive—St. Louis* (1946).

Perhaps most important, *Work and Leisure in Mid-Century Missouri* effectively met the Missouri: Heart of the Nation collection's original goal by making the works accessible to the public. The Boone

County History and Culture Center, where the Montminy Gallery resides, is located on a main thoroughfare in Missouri and is accessible to a larger public who may not venture into downtown Columbia, where University of Missouri and its museum are located, or into traditional museum spaces. Furthermore, as a collaborative effort between the MAA and a public gallery space, the exhibition drew upon its local constituents; it recruited MU professors, graduate students, and professors emeriti, as well as MAA preparators and regional gallerists to design, curate, and execute the show. Collaborations like these are what make art collections more accessible to the general public and facilitate a larger reception for art. *Work and Leisure in Mid-Century Missouri* is only one of the many exhibitions mounted by the Montminy Gallery that have succeeded in both content and spirit.

¹ Prior to the Missouri: Heart of the Nation collection's 2014 move to the University of Missouri's Museum of Art and Archaeology, a portion of the works were on view in private offices and hallways throughout Jesse Hall, the University of Missouri's administrative building.