

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
*A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society*

*Whither the Passenger Train?*

St. Paul Union Depot:  
Decline and Rebirth

*John W. Diers*

—Page 12

**Summer 2013**

Volume 48, Number 2

*For the Masses or the Classes?*

Fine Art Exhibits at the Minnesota State Fair 1885–1914

*Leo J. Harris*

*Page 3*



*This is an oil painting of an Irish wolfhound named "Lion," painted in 1841 by Charles Deas (1818–1867), an early Minnesota artist. The painting was a first prize winner in the 1860 Minnesota State Fair. In the article beginning on page 3, Leo J. Harris provides the background on this painting and considers fine art exhibitions at the Minnesota State Fair later in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

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**History**

Volume 48, Number 2

Summer 2013

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The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program of presenting, publishing and preserving.

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A Message from the Editorial Board

As the St. Paul Union Depot reopens with fanfare and hope for a revitalized future, John Diers takes us on a tour of its past—not just the romanticized version, but with a clear-eyed view of its strengths and weaknesses. After its completion in 1926, the Depot was managed by nine railroads and anchored by a massive postal operation. But already, the availability and use of automobiles was making inroads in rail passenger service, and soon air travel would do the same. The fascinating business story of the Depot over its working life has not often been told, and Diers does a great job. Leo Harris also shares with us the eclectic history of the fine arts exhibit at the Minnesota State Fair, which began as a tribute to European artists before the rise of local museums. Later, it evolved as a display of home-grown talent, reflecting popular Victorian pastimes—think china painting—as well as paintings by Minnesota artists. Finally, check out our book reviews for tales of two murders, 130 years apart, and John Milton’s complete examination of the life and times of Nick Coleman, former Minnesota Senate majority leader. Take this issue to the cabin or the beach and enjoy.

Anne Cowie,  
Chair, Editorial Board

# For the Masses or for the Classes?

## Fine Art Exhibits at the Minnesota State Fair, 1885–1914

Leo J. Harris

Just as the Biblical Moses sought the Promised Land for many years, so too did the Minnesota State Fair. The first fair held in Minnesota was in Benton County in 1852. The first state-wide territorial fair in Minnesota was held in Minneapolis in 1855, and there were 28 annual territorial and state fairs thereafter, until 1884. Fairs were not held each year, and those fairs which were held migrated among Minneapolis, St. Paul, Fort Snelling, Rochester, Winona, and Owatonna.<sup>1</sup>

The first Minnesota art exhibit was held in St. Paul at the 1857 territorial fair. Artists could enter categories which included “Paintings, Ambrotypes, Daguerreotypes, Photographs, Printing and Book Binding.” Prizes were offered in best and second categories for oil painting, watercolors, and crayon drawings. Winners received a diploma and an award of \$5.00.<sup>2</sup>

There are three periods of the Minnesota State fairs during which exhibits of the fine arts have been held. Fairs in the first, or migratory period (1855–1884), did include a few art exhibits, but they were singularly unimportant and little definitive comment can

be located concerning their content. The second period, starting in 1885, the year when the fair obtained its permanent location north of St. Paul, and ending in 1914, witnessed the blossoming of fine art exhibits into interesting, varied displays of which Minnesotans could be proud. The third period, from 1915 to date, encompasses a great wealth of activity over nearly a century of exhibiting the fine arts. The latter would require a book rather than an article to fully explore those developments. For a number of reasons the author considers the second period the most interesting and one that is largely unknown.

### Preface to the Story

In 1884 the Minnesota State Agricultural Society established a committee to select a permanent site for the state fair. After much discussion, the committee selected the site that the Ramsey County Poor Farm occupied, which was north of St. Paul and roughly halfway between Minneapolis and St. Paul. The first Minnesota State fair held at this location opened to the public on September 7, 1885.

The Minnesota State Agricultural Society appointed superintendents to oversee and manage the various departments that would be part of the fair. The superintendents appointed to be in charge of livestock, or farm produce, or horse racing, for example, had a simple job. They knew what their category was, what to display or to run, and whether or not an

“Vick” Harrow, Madison, Minn., occupied a place of affectionate glances by nature. The man from Minnesota had a pocket fever, which happened along with a neck. The man is “some millionaire” enough to see that he is not from the track to avoid a race. He had all he could do to get into the union fellows straight for a while after which he needed a little watch. It was a local sport and amateur race, showing some crisp action, which the reporter could not see. With his blooming face and a wide smile, endeavoring to be a success. Winnipeg was there, and was wearily delightful to see from a prominent place in the crowd. He was wishing that he had a dozen more runners to see of money at the fair. You that is a deal more than a variety theater than



Russell C. Munger was the art department superintendent at the 1885, 1888 and 1889 Minnesota State Fairs. Drawing from the September 15, 1885 St. Paul Globe.



Allegorical figure welcoming visitors to the agricultural, mechanical, and fine art wonders shown at the 1889 Minnesota State Fair. Sketch from the September 1, 1889 St. Paul Globe.

item should be in competition. But what was art? Did it include museum quality old masters, or merely art for competition? Did the art have to be done by professionals or by amateurs? Or did it have to be done by residents of the State of Minnesota? Did the art include sculpture or even the arts and crafts? Succeeding superintendents of the art department wrestled with these issues and, over time, came up with different answers in their search for exhibits that would please both the public and the critics.

### The First Art Department Superintendent

The first superintendent of the fine arts was Russell C. Munger (1837–1901). One of several brothers from Duluth, Russell C. Munger was best known at the time as “the music man of St. Paul.” He originated several bands, the most well-known of which was the Great Western band, which he directed for many years.



Artist's drawing of the entrance to the new art gallery building at the 1886 Minnesota State Fair. From the August 38, 1886 St. Paul Globe.

He was involved in the founding of the St. Paul Opera House, which he managed until 1872. He owned a store in St. Paul that sold musical instruments. He organized the first baseball club in St. Paul.<sup>3</sup> He had also been in charge of the art exhibits at several earlier State fairs.<sup>4</sup>

His artist brother, Gilbert Munger (1836–1903), worked and exhibited in Europe and the United States. For brief periods he lived in St. Paul and completed several enormous canvases of Minnesota scenes, such as a 10- by 7-foot depiction of Minnehaha Falls.<sup>5</sup> The Tweed Museum in Duluth has in its collection 22 paintings by Gilbert Munger.

In 1885 Russell C. Munger was in charge of exhibiting, among other things, professional art works, clocks, jewelry and plated ware, sewing machines, and natural curiosities. The categories of fine art had to be original works, done by Minnesota residents, subject to the admonition that “no premium will be awarded to unworthy work.” Specific types of art included portraits, seascapes, interior studies, animals, and scenes from life, all in oil or in water colors, as well as wood engravings.<sup>6</sup> In 1885 the art department building did not exist, and there was “no art hall or gallery where it was safe to exhibit a valuable picture.”<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, “under the most discouraging difficulties in the main building Mr. Munger made a very handsome and tasteful display of those pictures offered

for competition in prizes.”<sup>8</sup> Munger died in 1901 after a brief stay in the Rochester Hospital for the Insane.<sup>9</sup>

### The New Art Gallery Building

A new, one-story art gallery building was barely completed in time for the 1886 fair. It was 90 feet long and 40 feet wide, made of brown stone, red brick, iron, and glass. The floors were concrete. No wood was used in the construction so that the building was fireproof. The *St. Paul Daily Globe* noted that “the walls are unusually thick and strong and valuable paintings will be as safe here as if locked in the stronghold of a bank. The main gallery will afford hanging room for some 4,000 square feet of canvas, while two smaller galleries will provide space for thousands of photographs, crayons, architectural and mechanical drawings.”<sup>10</sup>

The art gallery building was located to the east of the Manitoba railroad depot and to the south of the oval race track.<sup>11</sup> Inside, the gallery was divided into two parts. The first room held works of fine art loaned by local collectors; the second displayed art that Minnesota residents had created and had entered in competition for prizes. For the 1886 fair, John Phillips, a portrait artist from New York City, was the art superintendent. He was in the Twin Cities to paint portraits of the Ryan family.<sup>12</sup> R.C. Munger assisted Phillips in preparing the exhibits.<sup>13</sup>

### The Third Art Department Superintendent

Phillips was followed by the nephew of an early, well-known St. Paul settler, Auguste Louis Larpenteur (1823–1919). This new superintendent was James Desvarreaux-Larpenteur (1847–1937), who had studied art and painted for some eighteen years in Paris. He returned to St. Paul in 1883 and engaged in various art-related activities. In addition to serving as the State fair art department superintendent in 1887, he served as the curator of James J. Hill’s art gallery. He was also hired by Thomas McLean Newsom, local newspaper publisher and editor, to illustrate an impressive 1886 prospectus for real estate development in the Pilot Knob area,<sup>14</sup> where Newsom hoped, among other things, to

feature a statue of Governor Henry H. Sibley in a ten-acre park.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to works of art entered for competition, Larpenteur borrowed art from local and national collectors. Minneapolis and St. Paul newspapers described this display, which included, among others, paintings by George S. Inness, Caducius Plantagenet Ream, J. Appleton Brown, Verbeck Horan, and Max Lebling. The *Minneapolis Tribune* noted that railroad tycoon James J. Hill and Governor William R. Merriam<sup>16</sup> also “contributed valuable works of art from the masters.”<sup>17</sup> The *Pioneer Press* commented that “a visit to the art gallery found everything in perfect order and the paintings most admirably arranged. The collection has been made with the greatest care, many of the paintings being originals by masters, and formerly exhibited in the Paris Salon.”<sup>18</sup>

are at work as hard as possible, and it is believed that by next week much of the empty space of Machinery hall, as well as in the annexes, will be occupied.

**THE ART GALLERY.**

Brief Sketches of Some of the More Artistic Works There on Exhibition — A Most Magnificent Collection Artistically Arranged.

A visit to the art gallery found everything in perfect order and the paintings most admirably arranged. The collection has been made with the greatest care, many of the paintings being originals by masters, and formerly exhibited in the Paris Salon.

James Desvarreaux-Larpenteur, the Paris Salon, is perhaps the most celebrated of American artists, is represented by two pieces, “Washing Day in Perugia Italy,” and another washing scene. The former is a large canvas; a field of waving grain in

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James Desvarreaux-Larpenteur was the art department superintendent at the 1887 Minnesota State Fair. Drawing from the St. Paul Pioneer Press, September 10, 1887.

The 1887 exhibit also included 143 works of art by local artists. Gold and silver medals were awarded to the best entries. The judges included Douglas Volk (1856–1935), the first director of the Minneapolis School of Art. The Minnesota State Agricultural Society proudly stated that:

So, too, in the art gallery was a grand collection of choicest paintings and works of art, the finest, by far, ever seen at one of our State



fairs, and reflecting greatest credit on the indefatigable superintendent, who had brought treasures not only from the private collections of many of our wealthy citizens and artists, but also some of the rarest and best to be found in Boston, New York and Philadelphia.<sup>19</sup>

The *St. Paul Daily Globe*, known at the time for its humorous asides, noted the following conversation at the doorway of the art gallery, “where two pretty maids, with black eyes, dark hair, and never-dying smiles sit and hold up the people and relieved them of their umbrellas and canes as they attempted to pass through”:

“Get your umbrella checked here, sir!”

“Oh, never mind, I’d jest ez leves carry it.”

“You can’t take it into this building.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’ll be sticking it into some of the pictures.”

The newspaper then went on to explain,

Place a farmer ten feet from an oil painting and he doesn’t appreciate it, but let him get two feet from the end of his nose and he’ll discover more beauties in it than the painter himself could find, and this is why the management will not permit people to carry canes and umbrellas into the art gallery.<sup>20</sup>

## The Next Two Exhibitions

In 1888 the art gallery, with R.C. Munger again as its superintendent, maintained its former good reputation for a first-class display of paintings and other works of art. The competitive gallery contained 75 entries.<sup>21</sup> The judges regarded the competitive exhibit as generally meritorious, but “not sufficient for them in according all of the medals.” Among the medals not awarded were the medals of honor and the grand gold and silver medals.<sup>22</sup> This feeling of the judges, unfortunately, was to be a harbinger of things to come in the following decade.

On the other hand, “of the many and various exhibits on the grounds none so much show the cultured taste and progressive tendencies of the age as the exhibit in the art gallery which greets the eye as a cynosure of panoramic beauty.” Included in this separate gallery, curated by St. Paul artist Vincent De Gervion,

were twelve paintings from the collection of old masters owned by a Baltimore resident, Dr. George Reuling. Noted were works by Edward Dubufe, Rosa Bonheur, and Linden Schmidt. The *St. Paul Daily Globe* went on in some detail to describe these paintings, and concluded by describing “a marvel in miniature by Pokitonow, the Russian painter. . . . It is only a few inches of canvas, but a master’s hand has transformed it to ‘a thing of beauty and a joy forever.’ It belongs to the Walker collection—a gem in a gem corner of the art gallery.”<sup>23</sup> The references here are to Odessa-born painter

Ivan Pokitanow and to Thomas B. Walker (1840–1927), the most prominent art collector in Minneapolis.<sup>24</sup>

An article in the *Taylor’s Falls Journal* of August 9, 1889, provided a tantalizing prediction of things to come at the next fair. It said that:

In connection with the management of the art department it might be stated that Mr. R.C. Munger spent four months in Paris at the Exposition, as agent for this Society, and while there met the Sultan of Turkey and received from him many valuable hints in regard to the hanging of paintings at the State Fair. The loveliest gem of the Art col-

## Prize-Winning Portrait at the 1860 Fair

Discovering information about early fine arts exhibits in Minnesota is difficult enough, but to be able to document a prize-winning portrait and its original owner is a significant breakthrough. The very first premium winner in the Minnesota State Agricultural Society’s fifth annual fair, held at Fort Snelling on September 26–28, 1860, was the oil painting by Charles Deas of a dog named “Lion.” Deas (1818–1867) was perhaps the best-known early Minnesota painter among his contemporaries, the so-called “artist-explorers.”<sup>1</sup>

The *Minnesotian Daily* described the painting as follows:

In the department of painting the display is creditable. One picture indeed, No. 43 (“animal in oil,” by Deas—an Irish wolfhound) we regard as of peculiar excellence. It was produced here at an early day, when artists were few. But it preserved with truthfulness, we are told the features of one well known at Fort Snelling years ago, in himself the embodiment of fidelity—a faithful dog. As a work of art, we think it entitled to the first place.<sup>2</sup>

Probably painted in 1841, this portrait was owned by Henry H. Sibley (1811–1891), who was then a supply and purchasing agent of the American Fur Company. Later Sibley was the territorial governor and then the first governor of the state of Minnesota. The painting is

now in the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society. It is reproduced on the front cover of this magazine.

According to art historian Rena Neumann Coen, there is an interesting story associated with this portrait. She reports:

Local tradition has it Sibley owned as many as ten of these large dogs, whom he kept around the house before his marriage in 1843 to Sarah Jane Steele. That lady showed an understandable lack of enthusiasm for maintaining a large kennel in her home and insisted that the dogs establish residence in the carriage house. Lion, so the story goes, was so incensed at the loss of Sibley’s favor to Sarah that, in a fit of jealous rage, he jumped into the Minnesota River and swam across to Fort Snelling on the opposite shore. There he spent the rest of his years sulking over the fickle nature of man and the intransigence of woman.<sup>3</sup>

Whether this account is apocryphal or not, the *Lion* portrait is inextricably tied to the Minnesota State Fair.

## Endnotes

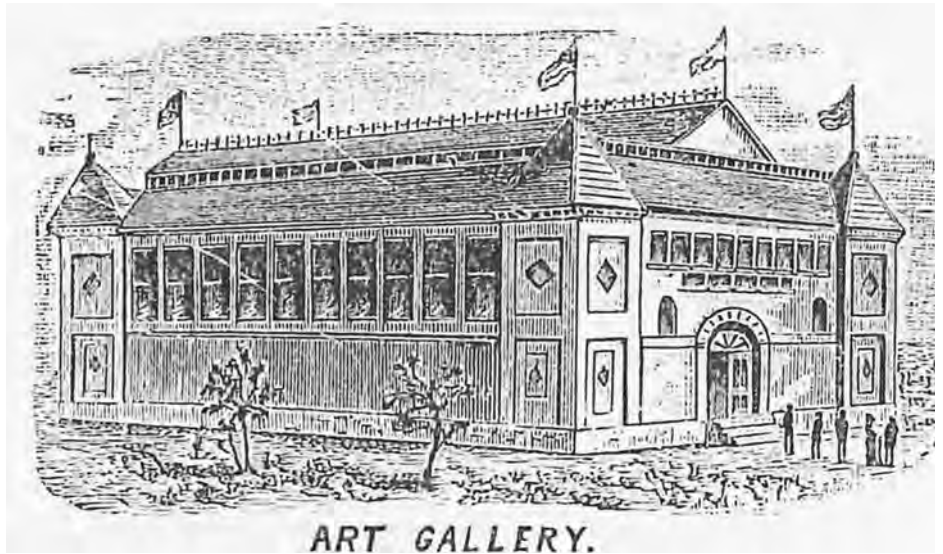
1. Rena Neumann Coen, *Painting and Sculpture in Minnesota, 1820–1914* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976), 13.
2. Undated clipping, *Minnesotian Daily*.
3. Coen, 14.

lection, and the most wonderful painting ever brought into the Northwest, will be Mr. Julius Kessler's painting, *Venus and Tannhauser*. It represents the soul touching, parting scene between the German Bard of the Kartz (*sic*; should read Hartz) Mountains and the beautiful Queen of love. The painting cost \$5000, and is as large as one side of an ordinary room.

Once again R.C. Munger was deeply involved, and the 1889 exhibition included the usual competitive exhibition by amateurs, plus a fine gathering of world-class fine arts. In addition to Kessler's *Venus and Tannhauser*, which was now valued in the newspapers at \$10,000, the latter included mountain scenery and landscapes by Chicago-born artist Henry A. Elkins (1847–1884); a fine collection of paintings loaned by Governor Merriam; and still others painted by Gilbert Munger. Also shown were works by Julius Legall, a young French artist who had just taken up residence in St. Paul.<sup>25</sup> Selected works of art were for sale. In the competitive section the gold medal for landscapes (presumably a scene of Fort Snelling, now in the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society) was awarded to Alexis Jean Fournier (1865–1948) of Minneapolis. Fournier, perhaps more than any other local painter at this time, set the standard for Minnesota's artists.<sup>26</sup>

The exhibit also included a display of specimens of solar-painted portraits of prominent citizens in the Twin Cities, contributed by the Edgar B. Smith Portrait Company of St. Paul. These were free-hand drawings in pastel on canvas as well as by crayon. Referring to this particular exhibit, the *St. Paul Globe* commented that

The question arises, however, as to whether this alleged art exhibit at the fair is a thing especially designed to please artists and lovers of art, or to excite admiration by the festive granger who predominates largely over any other class of citizen during that particular season. . . . If the latter, the object was certainly attained as the delighted exclamations of any clique of countrymen and women would show, when surveying solar-printed and pink tinted representations of fat babies and décolleté maidens with flesh



The new Art Gallery, which opened at the 1886 Minnesota State Fair. O.C. Gregg, ed., *Minnesota Farmers' Institute*, (1888), 19. Illustration courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

tints of a surprisingly unnatural hue. . . . If the former, the managers of the exhibit, must be credited with having done the best in their powers by their comparative isolation of the real from the sham art.<sup>27</sup>

Although the particular process by which the Smith Portrait Company produced likenesses of Minnesotans in its premises at 451 Wabasha Street is now shrouded in the clouds of time, its realistic portraits were extensively praised in the society and news pages of the *St. Paul Daily Globe* during the late 1880s.<sup>28</sup> Notwithstanding the judgment of the *Globe*, a writer for the *St. Paul Dispatch* commented generally that the art department was a credit to the state, not only from the comprehensiveness of the collection, but the taste and knowledge shown by both management and exhibitors.<sup>29</sup>

According to the Premium Lists for the fair from 1889 to 1914, no other art department superintendents were appointed until the 1912 fair. During these missing years, exhibition of the fine arts was a part of the Women's activities department.

### Art at the Fair in the 1890s

Between 1890 and 1899, the superintendents of Women's activities focused their attention on holding competitive exhibits of art by amateurs. In these years the trail gets murky and the record dim; only

scant information has been located concerning fine art activities at the fair.

In 1890 the art gallery building was filled with chairs for the audience and a platform for the exhibit of livestock. The art department had just been ousted from its specially designed premises! Hand-painted china headed the 1890 premium list of fine art works, which was open to amateurs only.<sup>30</sup>

The *St. Paul Daily Globe* had this to say about the 1891 exhibit: "The art department is not up to standard. The pictures for the most part are hopelessly bad. The china painting is excellent."<sup>31</sup>

The 1892 exhibition was only open to amateurs, and the list of art work created by crafts persons was headed by "Hair work (ornamental, etc.);" and "Hand-painted china." By far the largest category were paintings on glass, satin, silk, velvet, tile, chamois and bolting cloth.<sup>32</sup> The solitary comment that year by the *St. Paul Daily Globe* concerning the fine art department was that in "the Main building (where the art exhibits had migrated to) there are one or two attractive little heads done in water color and in pastel. . . . A cabinet in the art department contains a very fine exhibit of painted china pieces by two St. Paul ladies."<sup>33</sup>

The 1893 fine arts division was again open only to amateurs. Liberal cash prizes, from \$5.00 to \$20.00 were offered for collections of oil paintings; and

for single paintings of crayon, pastel, and sepia the prizes ranged from \$2.00 to \$20.00. Special premiums included a sewing machine, gold watch, fur cape, bronze figures, and art lessons.<sup>34</sup>

In 1895 the *St. Paul Dispatch* commented on the premises then available to the art department when it said,

One thing is missed, as it has ever been missed since it was abandoned and that is the art gallery. Even a practical man like C.W. Horr deplored the spirit which killed off the art gallery and handed it over to silo and silage when St. Paul and Minneapolis have turned out so many clever artists.<sup>35</sup>

Charles W. Horr was the assistant Superintendent of the Main building of the fair.

An examination of various successive listings of awards is instructive. The 1897 and 1898 categories of “Fine Art Work” include winners for hand-painted china, collections of paintings, Minnesota landscapes, figures, animals, or flowers, as well as painting on various types of cloth. The 1899 categories were “Hand-painted china” and “Fine Art (For Professionals)” which included hand-painted china. No, repeat no, paintings were included. The comparable 1900 category was “Fine Art Work” and it included only hand-painted china, hand-painted figures, and paintings on tapestry.<sup>36</sup> The complete transition away from the traditional oils on canvas was apparently not explained, but the morphing toward interest in hand-painted china requires some explanation.

Art author and critic Cynthia Braniamarte wrote that “It became an axiom of American art that men created fine art and most women artists dabbled in handicrafts and decorative arts. . . . Men painted on canvas; women decorated wooden screens, paper fans, and ceramic vases.” The painting of china became quite fashionable in the early 1870s when wealthy young women of conspicuous leisure took up china painting as a hobby. China painting, first in Europe and then in America, achieved artistic and social status by the mid-1870s. Juried shows of this material soon followed, commencing with the Centennial International Exposition of 1876, held in Philadelphia. The decoration of ceramics must be seen within the context of the arts and crafts



In 1886 there were only two public spaces from which to view the fine arts, at the Minneapolis Industrial Exposition and at the Minnesota State Fair. The reverse side of this business envelope carries a hand-stamped advertisement for both events. Courtesy of Leo J. Harris.

movements, with its emphasis on hand-crafted, individually designed objects.<sup>37</sup>

Many Minnesota women took up the decoration of ceramics as both a hobby and a profession. One local woman, Henrietta Barclay Paist (1870-1930), earned a national reputation. For a period of over twenty years, Paist, a St. Paul designer, multitalented artist, teacher and author, served as a porcelain judge at the Minnesota fair. She also won medals for her oil paintings and watercolors in earlier years.<sup>38</sup> She was well-known nationally for china painting and design.<sup>39</sup>

The 1896 Report to the Superintendent from the two assistant superintendents of the Women’s exhibit, Adelaide Crossley and Jonathan C. Crossley noted strongly that the room assigned for the display of the fine arts was altogether ill-adapted for that purpose:

There is no sufficient hanging space; the walls are too low; the light is miserable, the latter so much so as to cause adverse criticism from exhibitors and the public. If a painting has any good points, it is marred by the poor light. These defects in the art room can be remedied by raising the roof and having the light come from the roof. A number of the pictures had to be placed in the main room for lack of space in the art room.<sup>40</sup>

In his 1896 report to the State Agricultural Society, D.R. McGinnis, the

Superintendent of the Main building, had the following to say regarding art department premises:

The art department, placed in a wing of the annex, was altogether inadequate for the exhibits offered. Your superintendent would recommend that this entire building, at next state fair, be devoted to the women’s and art exhibits. I believe that both of these exhibits can be very largely increased in size and attractiveness, to the great benefit of the visitors and of the agricultural society.<sup>41</sup>

Instead the Society decided to confine the miscellaneous exhibits to the Main building and to use the dining hall for ladies’ and art exhibits.<sup>42</sup>

### Agitation and Negotiation

There were no competitive fine art exhibits at the fair from 1899 to 1904. The fine arts had hit rock bottom. Nevertheless, small steps were simultaneously being taken, albeit hesitantly, by the State Agricultural Society to increase the exposure of the fine arts. In 1903 there was a small display sponsored by the Minnesota State Arts Society. This Society was established by the legislature of the State of Minnesota to encourage the arts and crafts within the state. In 1903 there was also a special exhibit of student art collections, one each from the St. Paul and the Minneapolis Schools of

Fine Arts. These consisted of works of art in oil, watercolors, and plaster from Minnesota artists, as well as architectural designs, bookbinding, needlework, metal work, wood carving, and artistic cabinet wares.<sup>43</sup>

In 1904 a space of 30 by 18 feet in the Main building was allocated to the Minnesota State Arts Society. This was enclosed and equipped with showcases for the display of articles of virtue and value, and the walls lighted, such as any well-planned gallery for the display of pictures. The exhibit featured two pictures belonging to Minneapolis businessman B. F. Nelson, one by James McDougal Hart (1816–1901), and the other by Louis Matthieu Didier Guillaume (1816–1892), which had been hanging in the Minneapolis Public Library. The Minneapolis School of Fine Arts shared this space.<sup>44</sup>

In 1904 the Minnesota State Arts Society urged the Minnesota State Agricultural Society to provide better accommodations for the display of fine art, specifically referring to the so-called Institute Hall building. In exchange, it would assume the responsibility to manage these premises and to secure exhibits.<sup>45</sup> Robert Koehler (1850–1917), a prominent Minneapolis artist and the second director of the Minneapolis School of Fine Arts, stated the following in his presentation, on behalf of the Minnesota State Arts Society:

That for a number of years there has been no attempt at having any exhibition of art at our state fair has been a matter of regret to all who know how the success of the industries of a state depends on the art education of its citizens. The exhibitions of art were discontinued because of the difficulty experienced in getting really good material.

...

Our committee having the matter in charge are of the opinion that for the next exhibition the so-called "Institute Hall" should, if possible, be secured. Since this is the original purpose for which it was designed, it is specially suited for such use. As it is fire-proof, the expense of insuring the exhibits would be much less than in any of the other buildings. We desire hereby to make formal application to the Agricultural Society for this



*This photo from 1913 is of the Pioneer Portrait Gallery at the Minnesota State Fair. Judging from what can be seen here, the photographer probably took this shot at a time when the Fair was not open to the public and the gallery's floor space was used for storage and other activities. Charles J. Hibbard photo. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota State Fair.*

building in which to place our exhibit for 1905. With a suitable place like this, it can easily be made one of the great attractions of the fair. . . .<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps the lobbying of the Minnesota State Arts Society had succeeded since the art department sponsored competitive exhibits of oil paintings, watercolors, pastels, crayons, and charcoal works of art during the ensuing years of 1907, 1908, and 1909.<sup>47</sup> The utilization of space for art continued, however, to be an issue. The 1908 board of directors meeting of the State Agricultural Society set aside the art gallery "for the use of the ladies for the first three days of the fair, and the "Pioneers" for the last three days of the fair week." The south side of the wall was "to be used by the ladies for pictures, and the north side was to be used by the Pioneers."<sup>48</sup> The Minnesota Territorial Pioneers is an active organization of descendants of those who settled in the Minnesota Territory prior to 1858. Then and now, the Territorial Pioneers maintained a collection of portraits of many of these early settlers.

State fair goers were treated to a

special art exhibit in 1909, which was mounted in the Farmer's Institute hall. Thomas B. Walker, lumber tycoon and prominent collector of Minneapolis, had commissioned artist Henry H. Cross (1837–1918) to portray famous Indians and Indian fighters and scenes of historic Western events. The Cross subjects included, among others, Indian chiefs Geronimo, Yellow Hand, Sitting Bull, and Old Roman Nose as well as Buffalo Bill and Kit Carson. Walker had at one time intended to use these paintings as the nucleus of works at a new public museum of Native American Art in Minneapolis. This did not occur, however, and the paintings were eventually sold to the Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art in Tulsa, Oklahoma.<sup>49</sup>

During 1911, a new fine arts building, initially referred to as the annex to the Women's building, was constructed between the north entrance of the Women's building and the south entrance of the Manufacturers' building. The new gallery was 28 by 74 feet. "That year," the State Agricultural Society reported, "the artists certainly showed their appreciation of a



suitable place to hang pictures, as every foot of wall space was utilized, and the collection showed the work of some of the best artists in the state.”<sup>50</sup>

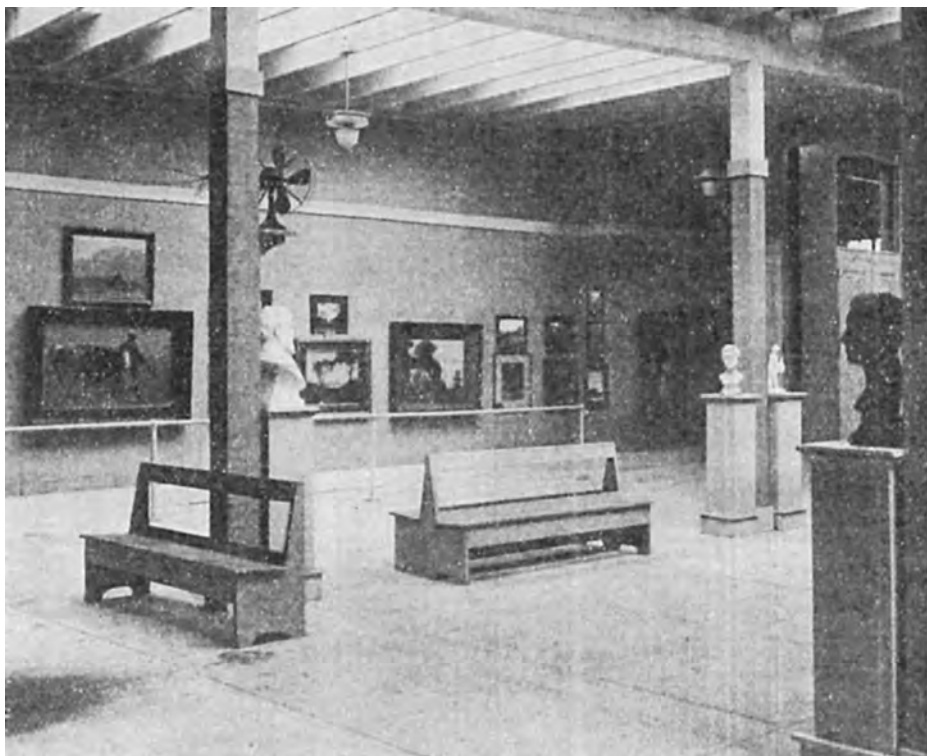
In both 1912 and 1913 the fine arts were included in a department superintended by E.J. Stilwell of Minneapolis, and Dr. Clara M. Luther of Lake Minnetonka. The relevant category was “painting, drawing, decorated china, handicraft and needlework.” Both professional and amateur classes existed, and the categories were oil paintings, miniature paintings, watercolors, and pastels, and black and white works. Only residents of Minnesota were eligible.<sup>51</sup> The fine arts were once again being recognized as suitable for exhibition.

In 1912 the art gallery was well filled, and contained the works of some of the best artists and art schools, including the St. Paul School of Fine Arts and the Artists’ Club. A curious assertion in the 1912 report of Clara M. Luther, Assistant Superintendent of the Art Department, which cannot, in view of a continuing past history to the contrary, be explained at this late date, was that “... this was the first year we were permitted to have a jury to pass on art work in this department.”<sup>52</sup>

A “Special Announcement” in the 1913 Premium List indicated that the Annual State Art Exhibition sponsored by the Minnesota State Art Society would be assembled and displayed at the forthcoming 1914 fair.<sup>53</sup>

### Ending With an Upper!

The art exhibit at the 1914 fair was held under the auspices and direction of the Minnesota State Arts Society. On the opening day of the fair Maurice L. Flagg, director of the Society, placed counters at the two entrances to the new art gallery. Over 43,000 persons visited the gallery on that day.<sup>54</sup> Five new galleries for the accommodation of a quarter-million-dollars worth of art were built, and they were designed to contain nearly 10,000 feet of wall space. Exhibited, in addition to the traditional wall art, was sculpture, industrial art, and handicrafts. Also planned were a series of art lectures. Speaking of how the new premises would encourage Minnesota artists, the *Minneapolis Morning Tribune* swooned:



*An interior view of one of the new galleries at the Minnesota State Fair for the State Fair Art Exhibit given by the Minnesota State Art Society in 1914. This view shows the Minnesota Art Gallery. From the Minnesota State Art Society Catalogue, Eleventh Annual State Art Exhibit (1914), no page number. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

... It is believed that marked impetus will be given to the cultivation of the fine arts in the Northwest. A jury of noted American artists will pass upon the art subjects at fair time and award the prizes. Whenever desired, a criticism of any exhibits will be made by the jury. Competent specialists will be placed in charge of the exhibits, at all times to explain to the thousands who throng the galleries the principles underlying the exhibits.<sup>55</sup>

In the competition class of Minnesota artists, well-known painters and sculptors included Nicholas Brewer, Frances Cranmer, Edwin Dawes, Ada Wolf, Alice Hügy, and John Karl Daniels. One hundred and twenty thousand people visited the art galleries in one week. Overhead daylight conditions, indirect lighting for evening display, and appropriate color schemes for the background walls aided in the presentation. Other special exhibits included a loan of American Contemporary Art courtesy of the American Federation of Arts, Washington, D.C., and lithographic prints by Vernon Howe Bailey of New

York, which depicted subjects he drew in the Twin Cities the previous year.<sup>56</sup>

The jury in 1914, which came from Chicago to evaluate all of the art objects, opined that the work of Minnesota artists was of higher standard and more substantial than in previous years and awarded prizes totaling \$625.00.<sup>57</sup> This was a huge sum compared to the paltry awards of earlier years. Docents furnished by the Women’s State Federation Art Committee explained the value and importance of the art exhibit.<sup>58</sup> And, for the very first time, local newspapers contained photographs of the winning entries.

Only an examination of the next hundred years would determine whether the future art exhibition activities at the Minnesota State Fair had risen to the acme of excellence that was demonstrated in 1914 in the galaxy of fine art exhibiting. That is a task, however, for another author to consider.

### Some Conclusions

During the thirty year period between 1885 and 1914 at the State fair there

were competitive art exhibits featuring the work of amateurs and professionals; there were special shows put on by particular groups; there were competitive exhibits of amateur work combined with fine art lent by local or national collectors; and, finally, there were four years in which there was simply no art exhibit at all. During this three-decade period a number of factors affected the great diversity of the art exhibitions at the Minnesota State fair, as well as influencing their notable successes or failures.

Perhaps one of the most important factors which influenced both attendance and interest in the fair art exhibits were conflicting, far better art exhibitions taking place elsewhere during the September days of the State fair. These were the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, held in Chicago. That exposition, with a dedicated art building and world-class art exhibits, was viewed by many Minnesotans during the nine-month period it was open. More important, however, and even far closer to home were the competing fine art exhibitions held in the galleries of the Minneapolis Industrial Exposition building. That facility held annual expositions every autumn from 1886 through 1892.<sup>59</sup> These Minneapolis exhibits featured art loaned by local collectors as well as a grand assortment of fine arts loaned by national and international collectors. Without question, the quality and range of these exhibits were far superior to the ones at the State fair.

There undoubtedly were circumstances which dictated what art was shown to the public at the State fair. The taste, or lack of it, by superintendents and those who judged the entries, may have been a problem. However, the local artists and the viewing public were clearly aware of the inconsistency in quality of the exhibits, and the apparent mind-changing by fair officials. In addition, funding or the lack of it for running a fine arts program was also an issue.

On the other hand, if the success of the entire fair was to be judged by popularity, which obviously affected attendance and the bottom line of the fair's profit and loss statement, then clearly the other competitive events, such as horse racing, farm produce, preserving and canning of



*Front view of the Fine Arts Galleries building of the Minnesota State Fair, in use beginning in 1911, on a sunny day when the nearby trees had no leaves and the fair was probably not open. Michael Nowack Photo. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

foodstuffs, and livestock displays had to be favored. They appealed to the grangers and most of the city folk.

What was certainly intended as a flip comment, made in 1904 when the Federation of Women's Clubs was asked to participate in the Women's work of the State fair, was: "This is a fair for the masses and not for the classes."<sup>60</sup> Quite possibly there is some truth here, applicable as well to the difficulties faced by the art exhibitions at the fair. On the other hand, many years earlier, a writer for the *Minneapolis Tribune* considered the art displayed at the 1886 Minneapolis Industrial Exposition. This was his vision of the purpose of a fine arts gallery:

The gallery is not intended to give entertainment merely to a small circle of critics, patrons and connoisseurs, but should have the far higher aim of instructing in the true principles of right art the masses of a large and liberal minded, but hitherto somewhat art starved, public.<sup>61</sup>

Finally, what would the reasonable expectations be for fine art exhibitions at the fair? During the late nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, Minnesota was an agricultural state, and appreciation of the fine arts was seemingly far removed from the experience of most persons in the rural communities. And, other than the handful of professional or amateur artists, most city dwellers had little comprehension, either,

of the fine arts. Public museums simply did not then exist, even in the state's largest cities.

## Epilogue

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts building opened in 1915, ushering in a major renaissance of the fine arts in Minnesota during the remainder of the twentieth century and beyond. Other major museums in the Twin Cities include the Walker Art Center and the Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota. Today students are educated in the fine arts at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design as well as in art programs at a number of other colleges and universities across the state. Many well-known professional and amateur artists produce work that is widely known and discussed. In addition, today there are art dealers who successfully market the fine arts, and, above all, there are many Twin Cities residents who are interested in and are involved in supporting the arts.<sup>62</sup> All of these numerous art opportunities and activities are regularly supplemented by the annual exhibition activities at the art gallery of the Minnesota State Fair. Thus we need to remember that the initial years of this effort to encourage the public exhibition of art clearly traveled a long and tortuous path before it reached the superior quality and easy access that is available to members of the public today.

## Endnotes

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28. See, for example, *St. Paul Daily Globe*, December 9, 1887 and December 25, 1887, p. 3.
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35. *St. Paul Dispatch*, September 10, 1895, p. 1.
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40. *Annual Report of the Minnesota State Agricultural Society for the Year 1895* (St. Paul: Pioneer Press Co., 1896), 99.
41. *Ibid.*, 102. The annex to the Women's building was later known as the Education Building.
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*Railroads spared no expense promoting their postwar streamliners in newspaper and magazine ads, on radio and television, and in colorful timetables such as these from the 1950s and '60s. All the rail lines represented here served the St. Paul Union Depot. Regrettably, many members of the traveling public found the competing appeals of Chevrolet, Ford, and Northwest Airlines were more persuasive. For more on the St. Paul Union Depot and passenger travel by train, see page 12. Timetables courtesy of John W. Diers.*