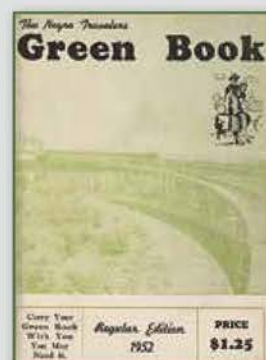
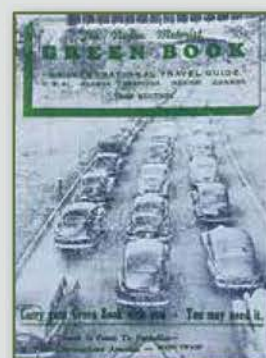


**Bob Brown:**  
**"Paint What You See"**

PAUL NELSON, PAGE 14



*Traveling Without Aggravation—  
How Victor H. Green Changed Travel for Black Americans*

## **Green Book Locations in the Historic Rondo Community (1940-1956)**

NIEETA L. PRESLEY, PAGE 1



## By the Numbers . . .

If an obstacle blocks our path, we find a way around said barrier. African Americans needed a reliable resource they could consult when traveling in the Jim Crow era. Victor H. Green created *The Negro Motorist Green Book* to help people find safe and welcoming tourist homes, restaurants, and other businesses that made leisure life a pleasurable life. There were even locations in St. Paul!

First and last year businesses in St. Paul's Rondo neighborhood were listed in the *Green Book*:

**1940 and 1956**

Victor Green's age the year he published his first book in 1936:

**44**

Number of Rondo locations listed in the *Green Book*:

**9**

Price of *The Negro Motorist Green Book* in 1938 and the *Travelers' Green Book* in 1963-64:

**\$.25 and \$1.95**

Number of St. Paul businesses outside of Rondo that advertised in the *Green Book*, beginning in 1957:

**15**

To learn more, see "*Traveling Without Aggravation—How Victor H. Green Changed Travel for Black Americans: Green Book Locations in the Historic Rondo Community (1940-1956)*" by Nieeta L. Presley on page 1.

## ON THE COVER



The Credjafawn Social Club hosted a "Gypsy Tour" to Wisconsin in 1952. Only the occupants in the lead vehicle and the social committee knew the itinerary. All other families caravanned to "unknown" locations

for a day of fun and friendship. Names listed on the photograph back: John H. Griffin; "Bubs" Powell, Jr.; Rodney Maxwell; Corrine Griffin; Yvonne Powell; Betty Maxwell; Revoida Wright; and Viola Johnson. Photograph in the Murphy-Taylor Family Papers, courtesy, Hallie Q. Brown Community Archives; "Gypsy Tour" details in St. Paul Recorder, June 27, 1952, 7.

The *Negro Motorist Green Book* covers (1941, 1949, 1952), courtesy of Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library Digital Collections

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CHAD P. ROBERTS

## Message from the Editorial Board

Successful communities are the result of dedicated citizens working for the betterment of all. This issue focuses on such teamwork, beginning with Nieeta Presley's never-before researched *Green Book* locations in the Historic Rondo community. In our county's history, Black visitors couldn't always find safe access to motels, restaurants, or other businesses. Rondo neighbors set out welcome mats and fulfilled this need.

During the Great Depression, the US government developed programs to help citizens earn a living at a time when few imagined seeing a stable paycheck again. The Federal Art Project enabled local artists, including Bob Brown, to get back on their feet. See Paul Nelson's story on page 14.

Our last two articles highlight historians: young students representing Minnesota at this year's National History Day and seven specially selected McWatt Fellows. Through community collaborations, these scholars have uncovered important contributions to our state's history, helping all of us better understand our past so that we may build toward a more equitable future.

The examples above depend on "we/us" to get things done. I joke that I am a one-woman publishing department, but I could never do this job alone. In fact, this year, it took assistance from twenty-seven executive and editorial board members, nine colleagues, twenty-five authors, and fifty individuals/businesses (4,100 volunteer hours!), along with our extraordinary designer Wendy Holdman and printers Modern Press, Co., and Bookmobile to tell our county's history. Thanks, too, to editorial chair, Anne Field. She usually writes this column, but she's on a much-deserved vacation. It's important to recognize such dedicated teamwork.

*Meredith Cummings*  
Editor

**Correction:** The photograph on page 10 in our Spring 2022 issue should be attributed to Stephanie Dehler of Stephanie Dehler Photography.

The Ramsey County Historical Society thanks former Board Member James A. Stolpestad and affiliate AHS Legacy Fund for supporting the updated design of this magazine. Publication of Ramsey County History is also supported in part by a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie Jr., and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon.



# Bob Brown: “Paint What You See”

PAUL NELSON

**T**he main reason to take interest in an artist's life is the artist's work. We know about Vincent Van Gogh's ear only because we marvel at his paintings. Bob Brown (1893-1954) was no Van Gogh, but he was a St. Paul painter of renown in the 1930s and 1940s whose work holds up well today. Van Gogh sliced off part of an ear in a fit of self-destruction. Brown hurt himself, too, but with the bottle, not the blade.<sup>1</sup>

Brown painted, mostly watercolors, in the regionalist style promoted by the Federal Art Project (FAP.) The FAP (1935-1943) provided work and a basic income to a few thousand American artists and artisans brought low by the Great Depression. A second goal was to foster American styles and tastes in the visual arts.<sup>2</sup>

Holger Cahill, national FAP director, wrote, “The aim of the Project will be to work toward an integration of the arts with the daily life of

the community. . . .”<sup>3</sup> Nothing abstract, nothing hoity-toity—paint the world around you, not what's in your mind. Thomas O'Sullivan, former curator of art at the Minnesota Historical Society, described the state's response:

Most Minnesota pictures illustrated people busy at work rather than idle or angry. Landscapes depicted farms and factories, Main Streets and city skylines.<sup>4</sup>

We don't know if the regionalist wave changed Brown's artistic course or suited his established tastes. Either way, he took to it. The majority of his known works fits in two categories: urban scenes—mostly St. Paul—and landscapes—chiefly Washington County and the Upper Mississippi Valley.

Bob Brown painted these images of “Downtown St. Paul;” “The Other Side of the Tracks,” which depicts Swede Hollow; and “Hills and Trees, Hudson, Wisconsin.” Brown rarely titled his works, rather, others sometimes ascribed names. “*The Other Side of the Tracks*,” courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society. Other images courtesy of Deborah LeSueur Photograph Collection of Bob Brown Originals.







## A Colorful Character with a Colorful “Story”

If Brown’s art interests you, then so may his life. In 1965, eleven years after he died, the Saint Paul Arts Center mounted a Bob Brown exhibition—his first solo show since 1941. St. Paul businessman Howard Niemeyer composed the program notes. What was known of Brown, he wrote, “has been pieced together from two primary sources—a shoe box of his personal notes to himself—and from friends still living.”<sup>5</sup>

[A] simple note written in his own hand conveys the following information: *Robert Aaron Brown—iron moulder, West Allis, 1910; pro ball player, 1910-11; Minnesota college, 1913; St. Paul School of Art, 1913-14; National Academy of Design, N.Y., 1915; Art Students League, 1915-16-17-21; free lance painter/illustrator, 1919-1932; St. Paul School of Art instructor, 1932-33.*<sup>6</sup>

The shoebox (now lost) also held a clipping recounting that Brown had studied in New York with Robert Henri, then traveled in Europe, and, there, admired the works of Peter Paul Rubens, El Greco, Honoré Daumier, and Paul Cézanne. Niemeyer commented that the information about Brown is skimpy, and “[i]n all probability, Bob would have wanted it all to turn out this way.”<sup>7</sup>

We, however, don’t have to be satisfied with Brown’s autobiographical blurb. Robert Aaron Brown was born September 16, 1893, in Berlin, Wisconsin, a village in the Fox Valley. Of his youth, we know that he grew up an only child (his parents, Hannah and James, were both nearly forty when their son came along). If it is true that he worked as an iron moulder in West Allis in 1910, he must have left home when young.<sup>8</sup>

The story of his baseball career got blown up over the years, probably with Brown’s cooperation. In his 2009 book, *Minnesota Prints and Printmakers, 1900-1945*, Robert L. Crump reports that Brown “played professional baseball for the Toledo Mudhens.” If true, Brown must have been a teenage phenom, as the Toledo team of that era had a roster of much older men and several past or future big leaguers, including Hall of Famer Elmer Flick, who at thirty-five was

on his way down, and Ray Chapman, twenty, an outstanding shortstop on his way up.<sup>9</sup>

But Brown never played for the Toledo Mud Hens. Its rosters are readily available online, and there is no Brown. Where did that story come from? Maybe here: In 1910 and 1911, there was one other Mud Hens team in professional baseball—the Fond du Lac Mudhens of the Class C Wisconsin-Illinois League. This, a more likely spot for a seventeen-year-old than Toledo, and just thirty-eight miles from home, falls within the sphere of the plausible. But barely; no Bob Brown appears in any available box score for the 1910 Mudhens or for any team in that league in 1911. Let’s call the pro-baseball claim “unverified.”<sup>10</sup>

In the blurb, Brown placed himself in St. Paul, in college, in 1913. Maybe. He was certainly in St. Paul by 1915, showing up in the city directory as a commercial artist. If he spent the next four years studying art in New York City, that would have made good sense for a serious young man. The Art Students League of New York was and is a famous training ground for young artists. Its list of alumni includes George Bellows, Norman Rockwell, Jackson Pollock, and hundreds more. And no one shone brighter as an art teacher in those days than Henri. His students included Bellows and Brown’s contemporaries Stuart Davis (1892-1964) and Rockwell Kent (1882-1971). Certainly, Henri’s enthusiasm for painting that focused on American scenes—especially urban grit—fit nicely with what Brown did later. But let’s be careful. Brown’s notes that say he was there at the same time (around 1917) and “studied under Robert Henri” may mean nothing more than taking a class from him. So for Brown’s participation in the Art Students League and study under Henri, we have only Brown’s shoebox to rely on. It’s plausible, but, again, unverifiable.<sup>11</sup>

Brown’s recitation of the facts of his life omits an important year—1918. Crump purports to fill in part of it, describing Brown as “a conscientious objector in World War I.”<sup>12</sup> Such a stance would have been rare and unpopular in Minnesota during that intensely xenophobic time. Objectors in those days went to prison or into the US Army—to try to negotiate a non-combat role—and almost all were religious, which, later in life, Brown was not. Brown went into the army—163rd Depot Brigade—at Camp

Dodge, Iowa. There were objectors there, almost all Iowa Mennonites. And Brown rose to corporal, an unlikely promotion for an objector. Let us label the CO story “dubious.”<sup>13</sup>

In his notes, Brown failed to record a 1918 life event that most people find important: He got married. Louise Kathryn Driese (1896-1963) was the daughter of a prosperous St. Paul German immigrant cigar manufacturer, Hugo Driese, and his German-American wife, Elizabeth Herrmann. Like Brown, she was young (he twenty-four or twenty-five; she twenty-one or twenty-two), nice looking, and artistic. The marriage probably seemed like a good idea at the time.<sup>14</sup>

If Brown studied in Europe, the likely years are the early 1920s. He and Louise disappear from the local record briefly, and her family may have been sufficiently prosperous to support them in a sojourn abroad. Europe at that time was a sensible and accessible place for young American artists. The Browns show up again in the mid-1920s in St. Paul, both working as commercial artists and living, briefly, with her parents in Forest Lake.<sup>15</sup>

In 1928, Brown won honorable mention for a piece titled “Mushroom Hump,” and, the next year, first prize among watercolors at the annual Women’s Club of Minneapolis art show—his first known showings.<sup>16</sup>

Niemeyer asserted with apparent confidence that Brown “was part of the world of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Sinclair Lewis, and both men were among his close friends.” Brown and Fitzgerald (1896-1940) *were* contemporaries and had the bottle in common, but one lived on the edge of destitution in Seven Corners, while the other lived a celebrity’s life in New York, France, and Hollywood. Lewis (1885-1951) and Brown probably never crossed paths, as from the time he became famous, Lewis lived mostly in Washington, DC; Vermont; and Europe. He and Brown were rarely in St. Paul at the same time. Someone—Brown?—had fed Niemeyer a line. We can label this one “a howler.”<sup>17</sup>

In 1930, the couple moved to Greenwich Village, where Brown tried to make it as an independent artist. He pounded the pavement and haunted the galleries. The timing, less than a year after the stock market crash of 1929, could hardly have been worse. He wrote to artist friend Clement Haupers, lamenting,



In his 1923 passport application, Bob Brown included a photograph of himself and his wife, Louise. *Courtesy of National Archives, no. 24368.*

... conditions which are most unpropitious for rank outsider to be scratching at the outer door, both artistically & economically & emanating [sic] as it were a distinct aromatic tincture of the wolf.

His worst days in St. Paul were, he wrote, “as economic security” compared to New York. But, with typical Brownian prose and spelling, he reported, “Am feeling fit as a permanent mau-soleum tennant [sic.]”<sup>18</sup>

### Meeting Meridel

The New York adventure was no success but possibly clarifying. Brown told a reporter, “I find myself wholly of the Midwest.”<sup>19</sup> Maybe New York turned him decisively regionalist. He and his wife returned to St. Paul by 1933 (and never lived together again). But the New York failure, however traumatic, was nothing, nothing, nothing compared to the emotional thunderbolt that struck him around the same time and left him stricken for the rest of his life: around 1930, he met Meridel LeSueur (1900-1996).<sup>20</sup>

Today, more than 120 years since her birth and a quarter century past her death, LeSueur remains famous, at least among Minnesotans of a certain age and political/social persuasion. She was the daughter of the radical feminist Marian Wharton and stepdaughter (from whom she took her surname) of the socialist politician and lawyer Arthur LeSueur. A Communist from age twenty-four, she lived for a while in a commune with Emma Goldman and worked briefly as an

actress in New York and Hollywood. In 1930, she was married (but not for much longer) to Russian-born labor organizer Harry Rice (born Yasha Rubonoff) and the mother of the toddler Rachel and the infant Deborah. Over her long life, she published some twenty books of fiction, biography, poetry, essays, and short stories for adults and children. How and where Brown and LeSueur met is not known, but that they met is no surprise: both belonged to the Twin Cities' art world.<sup>21</sup>

Their meeting touched off a river, a torrent, a tsunami of correspondence between them. He wrote her sometimes two or three times a day, and that which survives—about 350 sheets and scraps—gives us our only entrée into Brown's inner life. More about that later.

### Making a Name and A Little Money

Meanwhile, the 1930s proved to be a productive artistic decade for Brown. His creations appeared in twenty exhibitions, seventeen in the Twin Cities and three in New York. One of the New York shows in 1936 was a big one at The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). *New Horizons in American Art* celebrated the achievements of FAP's first year. There, Brown's piece, "Ashes," shared exhibit space with some of the greats of the era—Stuart Davis, Marsden Hartley, Rufino Tamayo—plus his Minnesota mates Cameron Booth and Stanford Fenelle.<sup>22</sup>

In his catalog essay on easel painting—Brown's category—Cahill expressed satisfaction that the American painters on display had

shown no reverence for European models—what he called "hero-worship."<sup>23</sup>

With the decline of dependence on outside influences, preciosity and self-consciousness have tended to disappear. These artists have come to see that preciosity is related to the worship of esthetic fragments torn from their social contexts, and to the idea of art for the select few. . . . This new work is often close to the quick, spontaneous life which is at the artist's door . . .<sup>24</sup>

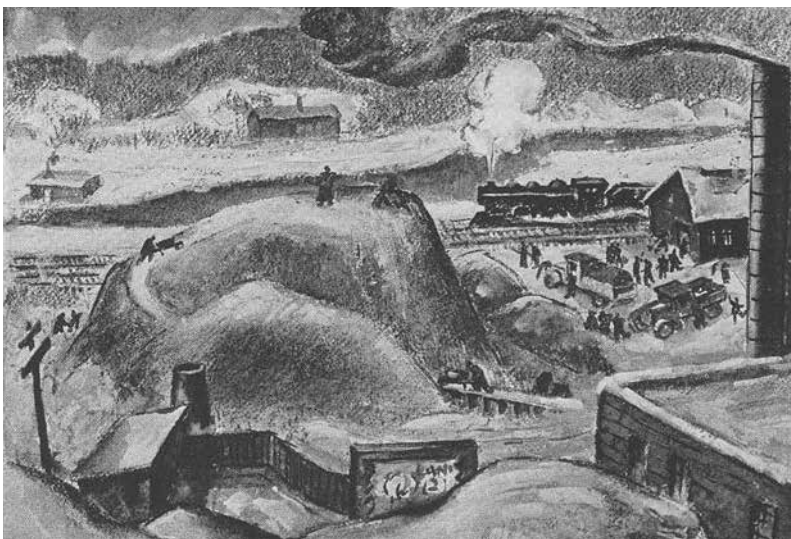
Cahill called what he saw "imaginative realism." Those few who have seen some of Brown's St. Paul scenes may find that phrase apt. They are recognizably St. Paul and yet a little off—imaginative. "Ashes," for its part, fit Cahill's mood—a work scene with no preciosity or even attempt at conventional beauty. New Horizons would be the only exhibition of national significance for Brown.<sup>25</sup>

The coming of FAP to Minnesota in 1935 probably provided Brown the steadiest income he ever had (or chose to seek), maybe in his entire life. (It's evident from his letters that sometimes he subsisted on local government relief.) The FAP's local administrator, Haupers, had been Brown's friend for years, and that probably helped. FAP artists got studio space, freedom to do as they pleased, and a salary—not much, less than \$25 a week—but for a man of Brown's no-frills mode of living, evidently enough.

By the mid-1930s, Brown had settled into the patterns of the rest of his life. He lived in a tiny apartment in old Seven Corners—a bedroom, another room that served as a studio, and a kitchen he didn't use. The address was 271 West Fifth Street, now the parking lot across the street from today's Roy Wilkins Auditorium. He painted and drew, he wrote letters to LeSueur, and he drank. His 1940 census record is revealing. He worked forty-two weeks that year for FAP and made \$900—\$22 a week. He paid \$23 a month in rent—about \$5 a week, leaving him \$17 a week for everything else.<sup>26</sup>

The FAP encouraged Minnesota painters whose work remains known today—Haupers, Fenelle, Dewey Albinson, Mac LeSueur (Meridel's brother), Syd Fossum, Dorothea Lau, Miriam Ibiling, and Booth. Brown was part of this set, and

Bob Brown's watercolor "Ashes" employs a characteristic composition scheme—all action centered around a dome- or hump-shaped central object. Courtesy of Fine Arts Collection, US General Services Administration.







Bob Brown frequently used the images of daily life around St. Paul as his inspiration. Here are his renditions of Third Street and a view of Saint Paul Central Library from below by the railroad tracks. *Courtesy of Deborah LeSueur Photograph Collection of Bob Brown Originals.*





Brown's efficiency apartment in St. Paul. Courtesy of Deborah LeSueur Personal Archives.



yet . . . In 1936, Fossum produced a revealing cartoon. It's a group caricature, featuring several local artists. There's no image of Brown. Instead, in the lower right corner, three toppled and empty liquor bottles are scattered near an arrow with the words "To Bob Brown." Ouch.

### Alcohol and Art

Brown knew he was a drunk. He mentions drink regularly in his letters to LeSueur. Twice he refers to hallucinations. Sometimes, he gushes self-loathing. Occasionally, he touts periods of sobriety. But there is no Alcoholics Anonymous for Brown, and he's a loner—except maybe when he's in a bar. He can't stay dry.

His drinking may have been part of what kept him and LeSueur apart. They did have periods of living together, in St. Paul (they show up twice together in the city directory—in 1935 and 1939) and at her country place in Lakeland,



"Twin City Art World, Circa 1936" by Syd Fossum. Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.

## **“The outside caress of the world up & over” Select Letters from Bob to Meridel**

Bob Brown's paintings reveal nothing of his inner life, but his words! Oh, my. He and Meridel LeSueur carried on their long love affair mostly from a certain distance. When apart, Brown tried to bridge the gap with letters. She saved some 350 of them, scribbled on pocket notebook paper, postcards, and scraps.<sup>a</sup> The words come straight from the heart.

While Brown wrote to Meridel obsessively, she, it seems, did not respond in kind. Here, he waits for word from her:

*March 193—*

*I have waited, restive, for the mail from you, it is maddening somewhat when a day passes with none—a word, just slight, is so reassuring of rhythmic ventricle in your excellent turbine (exquisite I meant, dear fellow) positive-present, just over the river—but it will come I've been destitute of words of (the immediate) late—they're gradually reviving—its such a relief from the slow stammering, I rather be 100% assembled—alert, than rich*

She has written him:

*Sweetheart wife—your words beautiful—arrived today I think you'r happy & I want you to be (pasture with us softly graying together—beautiful passage—I wonder that the plain unadulterated wd cud [word could] be employ'd so exquisitely—Im indecently / & continently & lovingly sober . . . with no reticence in Love—Bob your Husband*

They have quarreled:

*you asked me if I was a man & I answered in the affirmative yet last night I wept from a thorn in my heart over your vituperation & deep harsh verbal lacerations—there's grief in me, this place is a cold, lifeless, sepulcher, you seem to have gone & I pray contrite & sincerely that you return dear dear one,*

They have reconciled:

*Oh you were here—there is a wrath of love in me, you who call me darling with a rich heat of passion that I love—whom I love—: on the shore for, with corpuscles to meet corpuscles— (all red) that you admirable being whom vitality, love, 'god' & the dust of the earth in which everything grows—with the necessary nourishment grows; come & make our day / that wondrous day that is . . .*

He regrets his drinking:

*Tomb is still, jug is empty, follow'd halucination in 2 oblivion & nothing but black remorse. Am trying to patch up the horrible debris & repair the exploded*



Meridel LeSueur in 1932 when she lived at 2527 Harriet Avenue in Minneapolis during her courtship with Bob Brown. Courtesy of Hennepin County Library.

*cortex (totally wrecked) worse than horrible, the ruin worse than believable & the “never-again” completely at smithers—hundred miles below surface in molten feces up 2 neck & still taking depth . . .*

He is drunk:

*Sweetheart M'Del*

*I dont know whatinhel U are doing there I here its GDstupid whee love is, volved is't—have to go back for more questioning from [Welfare?] tomorrow—answer questions 2 skunks cudnt even respect in mean competition—the infant baboons are at winter play in these precincts in the goodold Jim Hill \$ way once as is—if it were . . .*

He's in love:

*Sept 16-32*

*The outside caress of the world up & over—the sun always brings that baptism of vitality & unity of our hearts—I feel you vibrate around me as never before, that heaven-on-earthly completion of the flesh-spirit cycle—the real benediction—the immediate going on, ever into new transition of greater intensity; Love.*



Washington County. But the two are like lovers from fiction—they can't be together, and they can't stay apart.

Despite Brown's drinking, he reached a peak of artistic achievement and renown in the early 1940s. The Walker Art Center mounted his first solo show in September 1940 to good reviews. John Sherman of the *Minneapolis Star Journal* wrote that the exhibition "provides adventure and stimulation for the spectator's roving eye."<sup>27</sup>

Bob Brown has a muscular art that has few pictorial clichés. His artist's eye picks out odd corners of landscapes, scenes of wreckage and toilers, tumble-down houses, interesting perspectives. Many of the pieces have tumultuous forms. . . .<sup>28</sup>

"I paint," Sherman quoted Brown, "to keep from being bored."<sup>29</sup>

The Saint Paul Public Library followed with another one-man show in November 1941. Art

critic James Gray of the *St. Paul Dispatch* saluted Brown's "vigor and originality" with effusive phrasing:

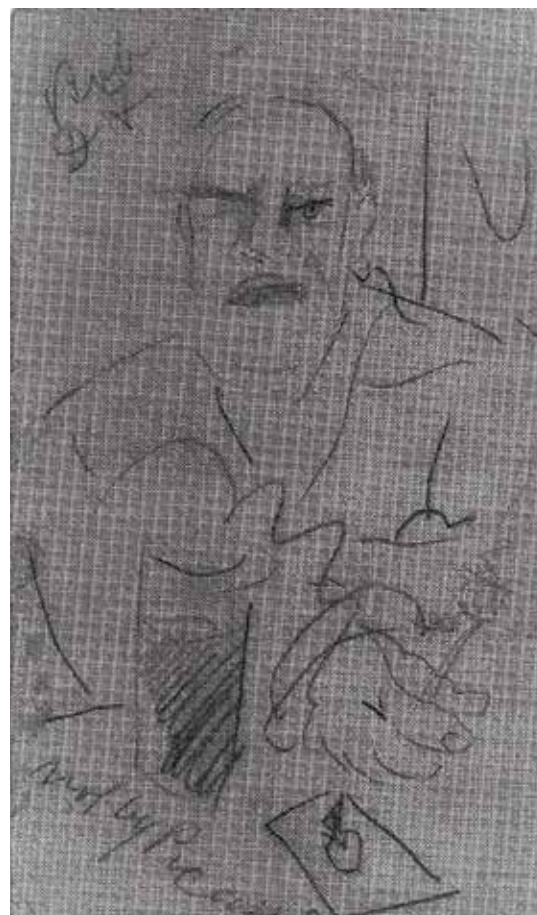
- flashing brilliance of technique
- dashing and disciplined
- freshness of insight
- delight of color
- informal waggery of social comment

No one wrote anything similar about Van Gogh in *his* lifetime.

Gray likened Brown to then-famous novelist Erskine Caldwell "because both are so humorous in the midst of their questionings and because both have persisted so unswervingly in being themselves."<sup>30</sup>

Brown persisted unswervingly in being himself, but by this time, who was he? The surviving letters between Brown and LeSueur cover only about twelve years—1930-1942—so we don't hear his voice again after that. We do, however, have a witness.

Few images of Brown are known to exist. The undated snapshot is probably from the 1940s. The self-portrait is likewise undated. *Courtesy of Deborah LeSueur Personal Archives and Deborah LeSueur Photograph Collection of Bob Brown Originals.*





Bob Brown sketched and painted a number of bar scenes, including this one titled "Bizarre Wonderment Bar." *Courtesy of Deborah LeSueur Photograph Collection of Bob Brown Originals.*

Deborah LeSueur may be the only person alive at this writing (2022) who knew Brown well. She is Meridel's younger daughter, and she considers Brown to be her father—not necessarily genetically (her mother was cagey about that, she said), but the father figure in her life. He had one driving interest, she says—his art. Then came alcohol; he took her to bars in his neighborhood. He also liked sports betting (allowing the young girl to choose his picks on occasion) and fishing. By the mid-1940s, he had become a well-known street character around Seven Corners, wearing a signature tweed jacket and cloth cap, a regular patron of the Poodle Dog bar and Golden Dawn Cafe. The letters tell us of persistent health problems, some possibly connected with alcohol abuse, and he certainly suffered from depression. He lived alone and never cooked, so his nutrition may have been, shall we say, haphazard.<sup>31</sup>

Still, Brown kept working. In 1943, he was commissioned to do home front war-effort paintings for the shipbuilding industry in Savage and the paper industry in northern Minnesota. The Walker put him back on display in 1943, 1944, and 1949, in the company of Albinson,

Davis, Adolf Dehn, Ben-Zion, and other top flight Americans.<sup>32</sup>

June 16, 1954, was a typical midsummer Wednesday, dry with a high in the low 80s. Brown went for a walk in the neighborhood, as he often did. This time, though, he never returned home. He was found sitting on a fire escape, dead of a heart attack, three months shy of his sixty-first birthday. (The newspaper's "Mr. Fixit" column that day warned that heart disease often went undetected.) Louise, who had never divorced him, had him buried at Fort Snelling National Cemetery.<sup>33</sup>

### **An Art World Mystery**

With Brown's death, the mysteries slowly began to pile up. What happened to his paintings?

Decades later, a collection of nearly 300 watercolors, prints, and oils came to light, but where were these when Brown died? They couldn't have been in his tiny apartment. He died without a will and with no acknowledged children, so Louise was his only heir. When she passed in 1963, she left a very short will that gave the unspecified contents of her studio—"all objects in store room"—to her niece Charlotte Byrnes.



Ramsey County Historical Society announces a related art exhibition: "Robert (Bob) Brown: Painting Ramsey County" in the North Gallery at Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth Street, St. Paul, from August 7 to September 25, with an opening reception August 25 from 5 to 7 pm. For more information, call (651) 222-0701 or visit [www.rchs.com](http://www.rchs.com).

But, again, she couldn't have warehoused 300 items, and her appraisers placed a total value on "antiques and paintings" of \$2,000.<sup>34</sup>

We have seen that the St. Paul Art Center mounted a Bob Brown retrospective in 1965. Where the paintings came from and where they landed after the show's end, we do not know, though Deborah LeSueur recalls that some, along with a box of letters from her mother, went to a downtown St. Paul antique store. Another twenty years then passed before the "Robert Aaron Brown Collection," as it came to be known, surfaced once again.

The story by Gareth Hiebert in his May 24, 1985, "Oliver Towne" newspaper column was that the paintings had been held in local bank vaults as collateral for loans, finally landing at Heritage State Bank in North St. Paul, jumbled in trash bags and boxes. According to Laura Mabie, the woman given charge of the collection, some of the unpaid loans had been taken out by Brown himself. Now, it's hard to believe that any banker would lend even ten dollars to a well-known street character and drunk, one with no regular income, unless that banker, say, spent the occasional afternoon with Brown at the Poodle Dog. But that tale came from an inside source, so let us call it "oddly possible."<sup>35</sup>

The more complete story of the Brown collection bears a whiff of bank fraud. Keith and Patricia Richards, owners of a corporation called K-Pat, Inc. and The Hideaway, a Maplewood nightclub, acquired 294 works by Brown, possibly in the 1970s. In 1982 and 1983, they pledged the collection as security for four hefty loans from banks in Ramsey and Washington Counties. Keith Richards first used the collection as collateral for two personal loans totaling \$320,000, then transferred ownership of the collection to K-Pat, which then used it to secure loans of another \$320,000 from two other banks. The collection was rather fancifully appraised at \$150,000—Brown would have been amazed—leaving the banks holding a \$490,000 bag when the couple and K-Pat promptly went bankrupt. Rights to the collection had to be sorted out in court.<sup>36</sup>

Mabie told Hiebert that the banks hoped to sell the whole collection to one buyer. That unlikely buyer turned out to be the local hockey magnate and principal founder of the Minnesota North Stars, Walter Bush. According to his son Steven, Bush really had no idea what to do with the stuff, so back into storage it went for another twenty years. Eventually, Bush gave twenty-six items to the Minnesota Historical Society and sold the rest. So, most of the Brown collection is out there somewhere, likely scattered, in private hands.<sup>37</sup>

One Brown oil hangs on the west wall of the Gale Family Library at the Minnesota Historical Society, near the doors to the lobby. If you want to see any others, well, you have to know somebody. A handful of museums—in Minneapolis, North Carolina, Wisconsin, and Kansas—keep one or two Bob Browns in their collections but not on display. They come up for sale now and then and sell fast. Not long ago, a Brown watercolor painted for FAP, hence property of the United States, turned up in an Oakland auction house and was seized by the government. Deborah LeSueur has several. Members of the Driese family own a few. There's one at my house.<sup>38</sup>

The Minnesota Historical Society possesses but does not wholly own (or display), the biggest collection of Brown's works. Some thirty-five came on loan from the General Services Administration (GSA), added to Bush's donations, and a handful came by individual loan or gift. No one knows how many original works exist or where they all are. To borrow Arnold Niemeyer's words, Bob Brown might have wanted it to turn out this way.

**Acknowledgments:** Appreciation to Julie Redwine of the General Services Administration, Steven Bush, Tim Bechtold of Gallery 5004, and warmest thanks to Deborah LeSueur, without whom this article could not have been written.

*Paul Nelson is an amateur historian and a frequent contributor to these pages. He is the proud owner of a Bob Brown painting, with, of course, no given title.*

## NOTES

1. "Robert Aaron Brown, 1923," United States Passport Applications, 1795-1925, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:QV5Y-CBFD>), Minnesota, source certificate #243681, NARA microfilm publications M1490 and M1372 (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); "Why Did Vincent van Gogh Cut off His Ear?" Van Gogh Museum-Amsterdam, accessed June 2, 2021, <https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/art-and-stories/vincent-van-gogh-faq/why-did-vincent-van-gogh-cut-off-his-ear>.
2. Kelly Richmond Abdou, "Learn How the 'Federal Art Project' Gave American Artists Hope During the Great Depression," My Modern Met, accessed April 28, 2022, <https://mymodernmet.com/wpa-federal-art-project/>.
3. Thomas O'Sullivan, "The WPA Federal Art Project in Minnesota: A Job and A Movement," *Minnesota History* 53, no. 5 (Spring 1993): 186.
4. O'Sullivan.
5. Howard Niemeyer, "Bob Brown, Drawings/Oils/Watercolors," incomplete program notes, 1965 Bob Brown exhibition at St. Paul Art Center, folder one, Bob Brown correspondence, Meridel LeSueur papers, Minnesota Historical Society (hereafter MNHS). The program lists Brown's birthyear as 1895, but most sources note a September 16, 1893 date.
6. Niemeyer.
7. Ibid.
8. Thirteenth Decennial US Census, 1910, Berlin, Wisconsin, Enumeration District 103, April 15, 1910, 579.
9. Robert L. Crump, *Minnesota Prints and Printmakers, 1900-1945* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2009), 69; 1911 Toledo Mud Hens Statistics, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.statscrew.com/minor-baseball/stats/t-th14979/y-1911>. Quite a few Fond du Lac Mudhens box scores and game stories from 1910 and 1911 have survived; no Bob Brown appears; "Elmer Flick," National Baseball Hall of Fame, accessed June 4, 2021, <https://baseballhall.org/hall-of-famers/flick-elmer#:~:text=Flick%20was%20elected%20to%20the,9%2C%201971;introducing...Ray%20Chapman,> Hall of Fame Debate, accessed June 4, 2021, <https://hof-debate.wordpress.com/2009/08/10/introducing-ray-chapman/>.
10. Deborah LeSueur, phone interview with author, October 29, 2020. LeSueur said that Brown mentioned playing professional baseball, but she recalls no details; "Sports: Standing of the Teams: Wisconsin-Illinois League," *The Oshkosh Northwestern*, June 10, 1910, 7; "Standing of the Clubs" and "Bat Out Another Victory Yesterday," *Appleton Post-Crescent*, August 31, 1911, 8. A general, though by no means exhaustive, survey of articles has found no one in the league named Brown at that time.
11. "Robert A. Brown," *Saint Paul City Directory* (St. Paul, R. L. Polk & Co, 1915), 370; "About Robert Henri," Robert Henri Museum, accessed June 2, 2021, <https://www.roberthenrimuseum.org/about-robert-henri>; "Prominent Former Students of the Art Students League of New York," and "Past Instructors and Lecturers of the Art Students League of New York," The Art Students League of New York, accessed May 26, 2022, <https://theartstudentsleague.org/instructors-and-lecturers-of-the-art-students-league-past-and-present/>; Niemeyer.
12. Crump.
13. "Robert Aaron Brown," Find A Grave, accessed April 28, 2022, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/425362/robert-aaron-brown>; "Brief History of Conscientious Objection," Swarthmore College, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.swarthmore.edu/library/peace/conscientiousobjection/co%20website/pages/HistoryNew.htm>; Marchal E. Landgren, *Years of Art, the Story of the Art Students League of New York* (New York: Robert M. McBride & Co., 1940), 114; "Conscientious Objectors," *Evening Times-Republican* (Marshalltown, IA), June 11, 1918, 7. The paper reported around one hundred objectors at Camp Dodge, most of them Iowa Mennonites; "Robert Aaron Brown, 27 Feb 1919," United States, Veterans Administration Master Index, 1917-1940, database, FamilySearch (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:QPZY-1R7R>), citing Military Service, NARA microfilm publication 76193916 (St. Louis: National Archives and Records Administration, 1985); "Robert Aaron Brown, 1923," United States Passport Applications.
14. "Louise Kathyryn Driese," Minnesota Births and Christenings, FamilySearch, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:FDZX-M2N>; Thirteenth Annual US Census, 1910, St. Paul, Enumeration District 57, April 16-18, 1910, 95. Louise Driese was born September 6, 1896, in St. Paul to Hugo E. Driese (born in Germany) and the former Elizabeth Herrmann (born in Kentucky to German parents). In 1910, the family lived at 28 Smith Avenue, near the corner of West Seventh Street. Fifteenth Annual US Census, 1930, New York City, Enumeration District 31-244, April 9, 1930. In this census, the Browns reported their ages at marriage as twenty-five and twenty-two, making the year probably 1918.
15. *Saint Paul City Directory*, 1923, 276; 1924, 387; 1925, 259.
16. "Ella M. Witter Painting Given Art Show Prize," *Minneapolis Star*, September 29, 1928, 19.
17. Sally Parry, email to author, June 6, 2021. Parry, with the Sinclair Lewis Society, wrote that Brown's name does not appear in either of the two major biographies of Sinclair Lewis. "Lewis spent the fall of 1917 and the winter of 1918 in St. Paul, but beyond that, he didn't live in the city again until 1947 when he was doing research at the Minnesota Historical Society. In 1917, he lived on Summit Avenue, so I doubt that he would have run into Brown then, although he [Lewis] loved to walk and apparently walked all over St. Paul." Brown's notes indicate that he was in New York in 1917, and he enlisted March 15, 1918.
18. Bob Brown, letter to Clement Haupers, Clement Haupers papers (P1635), box 1, correspondence 1930-1939, MNHS. The letter is undated but is the first in the folder, suggesting a date of 1930.
19. Niemeyer.



20. Fifteenth Annual US Census, 1930; Brown letter to Haupers; *Saint Paul City Directory*, 1932, 217.

21. "Women of Valor: Emma Goldman," Jewish Women's Archive, accessed May 19, 2022, <https://jwa.org/womenofvalor/goldman>. Emma Goldman was an anarchist who fought against "inequality, repression and exploitation." This biographical sketch comes from the MNHS introduction to her papers, accessed June 4, 2021, <http://www2.mnhs.org/library/findaids/00323.xml?return=brand%3Dfindaids%26q%3Dmeridel%2520lesueur>.

22. The Museum of Modern Art, "New Horizons in American Art," news release no. 9236-22, September 12, 1936, accessed May 19, 2022, [https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press\\_archives/339/releases/MOMA\\_1936\\_0035\\_1936-09-02\\_9236-22.pdf](https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/339/releases/MOMA_1936_0035_1936-09-02_9236-22.pdf); The Museum of Modern Art, "Index to Artists in the Exhibition," *New Horizons in American Art* (NY: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936), 169-171.

23. Holger Cahill, "New Horizons in American Art," *New Horizons in American Art* (NY: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936), 34.

24. Cahill, 34-35.

25. Travis E. Nygard, "It's Time to Rethink Regionalism in Midwestern Life: How Two National Magazines Caricatured a Midwestern Art Movement and Hid its Critical and Community-Engaged Edge," *Middle West Review* 7, no. 1 (Fall 2020): 77.

26. Sixteenth Annual US Census, 1940, St. Paul City, Enumeration District 90-68, April 19, 1940.

27. John K. Sherman, "No Spectator Boredom at Bob Brown Exhibit," *Minneapolis Star Journal*, September 8, 1940, 13.

28. Sherman, 13.

29. Ibid.

30. James Gray, "The Minnesota Scene on Canvas and in Fiction," *St. Paul Dispatch*, November 26, 1941, 12.

31. "Poodle Dog" and "Golden Dawn," *Saint Paul City Directory*, 1940, 1019, 435. LeSueur, telephone interview; "Robert Brown, Artist, Funeral To Be Friday," *St. Paul Dispatch*, June 23, 1954, 21.

32. "Modern Painters in Minnesota," Walker Art Center, press release, March 30, 1949 in Walker Art Center archives.

33. News summaries from *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, June 16 and 17, 1954; "Robert Brown, Artist, Funeral . . ." 21; "Deaths—Robert Brown," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, June 30, 1954, 25. "Robert A. Brown," Certificate of Death, Minnesota Department of Health, no. 13883, June 21, 1954; "Brown, Robert A.," Report of Internment, Fort Snelling National Cemetery, n.d.

34. "Estate of Louise K. Brown," Last Will and Tes-

tament (January 25, 1963) and Inventory and Appraisal (May 19, 1965), Ramsey County Probate Court file no. 109416; "Louise K. Brown," Certificate of Death, Minnesota Department of Health no. 29226, February 2, 1963.

35. Gareth Hiebert, "St. Paul artist's works rediscovered," *Pioneer Press*, May 24, 1985, D1; Will and inventory.

36. *Iannacone v. Capitol City Bank* (In re: Richards), 58 Bankruptcy Reporter 233 (D. Minn. 1986). An appendix to this memorandum provides the only known list of Bob Brown works. Matching these with any works known today is difficult because the artist did not always include titles; titles often were ascribed by others. The list consists of thirty-four oils, ninety-eight drawings, and 162 watercolors—294 in all. Gareth Hiebert wrote that the collection was "some 400," but he probably meant "some 300."

37. Steven Bush, phone interview with author, March 8, 2021; "Hockey mourns pioneer of sport," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, September 23, 2016, C5.

38. The GSA's inventory of Bob Browns—twenty-three titles, thirty-four items—may be found here: <https://www.gsa.gov/fine-arts/artist/781>. Some belonging to GSA are catalogued only by MNHS. FAP required its easel painters to produce a work every four to eight weeks, so even if Brown worked for, say, six full years, the total number required might not exceed seventy; Nancy A. Johnson, *Accomplishments: Minnesota Art in the Depression Years* (Duluth: Tweed Museum of Art, 1976). It seems likely that Brown painted some works for FAP that have disappeared. "Ashes," for example—the painting shown at MoMA in 1936—does not appear in any inventory, nor does a Brown painting that appears in a photo of Governor Elmer Benson. Museums known to have a Bob Brown or two include MIA and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis; Oshkosh Public Museum in Wisconsin; the Weatherspoon Art Museum in Greensboro, North Carolina; and the Mulvane Art Museum in Topeka. According to Julie Redwine of the GSA, the government has never sold any work of art created for FAP; but it has no way of knowing how many may have disappeared before being cataloged; Lisa Fernandez, "1940 'New Deal' Government Painting Shows Up at Oakland Auction," *NBC Bay Area*, October 5, 2015, accessed June 5, 2021, <https://www.nbcbayarea.com/news/local/1940-new-deal-government-painting-shows-up-at-clars-auction-gallery-in-oakland/65374/>.

#### Notes to Sidebar on p. 21

a. Meridel LeSueur Papers, Bob Brown correspondence files, box 10, Minnesota Historical Society.

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

A PUBLICATION OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Preserving our past, informing our present, inspiring our future.

The Ramsey County Historical Society (RCHS) strives to innovate, lead, and partner in preserving the knowledge of our community, deliver inspiring history programming, and incorporate local history in education.

The Society was established in 1949 to preserve the Jane and Heman Gibbs Farm in Falcon Heights, which the family acquired in 1849. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974, the original programs told the story of the Gibbs family. In 2000, with the assistance of a Dakota Advisory Council, RCHS also began interpreting Dakota culture and lifeways, now telling the stories of the remarkable relationship between Jane Gibbs and the Dakota people of Heyáta Othúnwe (Cloud Man's Village).

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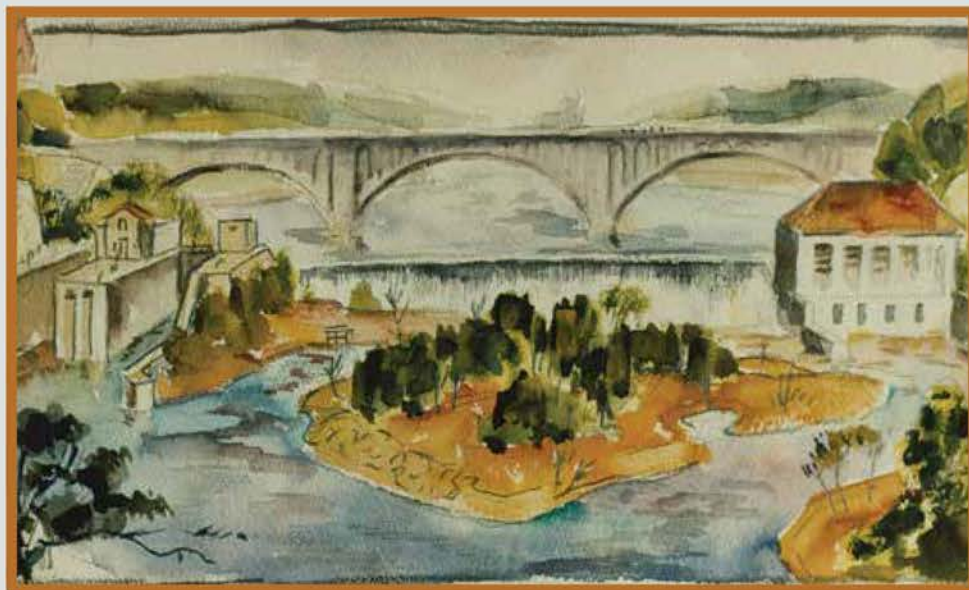
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## Bob Brown: "Paint What You See"

PAUL NELSON, PAGE 14



Bob Brown was taught to "paint what you see," and so he did—creating scores of paintings of recognizable sights and scenes throughout St. Paul and nearby counties, including these depictions of the Ford Bridge and Swede Hollow. *Courtesy of Deborah LeSueur Photograph Collection of Bob Brown Originals and Minnesota Historical Society.*