

In Memoriam

# CAMERON BOOTH

1892–1980

## *A Chronicle from His Scrapbooks*

Nina Marchetti Archabal

CAMERON BOOTH, dean of Minnesota painters, died on March 7, 1980. He had been involved in art in Minnesota for more than sixty years. Since 1976 he had been an honorary member of the Minnesota Historical Society's executive council. In June, 1980, his widow, Pearle, generously gave Booth's scrapbooks, which she had faithfully kept as a chronicle of his life, to the society's manuscripts collection. The material in the seven scrapbooks is arranged more or less chronologically from 1914 through 1980. It contains numerous newspaper clippings, art catalogs, reviews, and letters relating to Booth's long life and work. Along with the fine selection of Booth's paintings acquired by the society over the years, these scrapbooks are a rich source for the study of Minnesota's "old master."

The society owns approximately forty of Booth's art works. They include paintings from several periods in his

career, beginning with fine examples (including "Chippewa Mourners" on the cover) of his Indian oils of the early 1920s. In 1974 he presented the society with sixteen gouache paintings, mostly done in the 1930s, of Minnesota scenes — urban and rural. Meanwhile, the society was acquiring other Booth paintings, among them a fine selection of colorful farmscapes with horses (perhaps his best-known subjects) and, most recently, a large abstract painting from 1954, "Summer Solstice."

CAMERON BOOTH was born in Erie, Pennsylvania, on March 11, 1892, the son of Frances Ada Brown and George Booth, a Presbyterian minister. After moving to several locations in New York, Canada, and the Midwest, the family finally settled in Moorhead, Minnesota, where Cameron attended high school. Upon graduation in 1912, he enrolled at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago to study traditional academic painting under H. M. Walcott. While living in Chicago, Booth took advantage not only of the standard courses offered at the institute but also of the opportunities to study the famous impressionist works in the institute's collections and to see the modern works in the Armory Show, America's first major exhibition of avant-garde art. Although the influence of new tendencies in art is not immediately evident in Booth's early works, his abstract paintings from the 1940s and 1950s may contain echoes of the expressionism represented in the Armory Show by the

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ARTIST CAMERON BOOTH painted in his studio in fall, 1979. — Steven Trimble photo.

works of German moderns Wassily Kandinsky and Ernst Kirchner.<sup>1</sup>

Booth's mastery of technique was recognized as early as 1917 when the Chicago institute awarded him the

<sup>1</sup>After its initial showing in New York in February, 1913, the Armory Show traveled to Chicago. It included more than 1,500 works, among them Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase," which elicited an avalanche of ridicule from laymen and art aficionados alike. Remarking on art trends represented by the show, former President Theodore Roosevelt commented that "we have to face the fact that there is apt to be a lunatic fringe among votaries of any forward movement." (Theodore Roosevelt, "A Layman's View of an Art Exhibition," in *Outlook*, 103:719 [March 29, 1913], quoted in Barbara Rose, *American Art Since 1900: A Critical History*, 67 [New York, 1967]).

<sup>2</sup>*Minneapolis Journal*, October 23, 1923, a clipping in vol. 1 (1914-1941) of Cameron Booth scrapbooks (hereafter cited Scrapbook 1) in the Minnesota Historical Society's division of archives and manuscripts. See also, H. H. Arnason, "Cameron Booth," in *Cameron Booth: 48 Paintings from 1946 through 1958*, p. 4 (Minneapolis, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1958).

John Quincy Adams Foreign Traveling Fellowship. He used the fellowship money to support several months of travel in France, where he gained further exposure to the most advanced art as well as to works of the old masters. After service in the United States army in World War I, Booth spent the year 1919 in Paris "and was exposed to all the new developments in French art." In 1921 he returned to Minnesota to accept a teaching position at the Minneapolis School of Art (now the Minneapolis College of Art and Design). He took a leave of absence the following year and spent several months on the Leech Lake Reservation at Onigum, sketching and painting the northern Minnesota landscape and scenes of local Ojibway Indian life. Reflecting on that time, he commented: "The more I knew about them [the Indians], the more interesting they became." Along with a fascination for Indian life, Booth began to develop an interest in horses as a subject for painting. This interest would continue throughout his life and dominate the last years of his work.<sup>2</sup>

In the spring of 1922 Booth entered his oil, entitled "Horses and Men," in a state-wide painting contest sponsored by the Minnesota State Art Society. It won first prize among oil paintings and was exhibited with other entries first in March in the new galleries of the Minnesota Historical Society's main building, which had been completed only five years earlier, and subsequently under the auspices of Carleton College in Northfield.<sup>3</sup> According to the *Minneapolis Journal*, "Mr. Booth had never before exhibited in the northwest." That fall he entered the Minnesota Artists' Competition at the State Fair with possibly the same painting shown in the earlier exhibit but with a new title. Not only did Booth win the top honor again but his painting, called "A Minnesota Lumber Camp," was presented to Vice-President Calvin Coolidge when he visited the 1922 fair. Booth's career in Minnesota was off to a brilliant start.<sup>4</sup>

The following year, Cameron Booth expanded his horizons beyond Minnesota. In April his "Early Mass," an oil painting of Leech Lake Indians on their way to church, earned the distinction of being included in the American section of the International Exhibition of Contemporary Paintings at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh. He and Anthony Angarola, an instructor at the Minneapolis School of Art, were the only Minnesota artists represented in the 1923 Carnegie show. In August Booth entered "Early Mass" in the State Fair competition and once again walked away with the top honor. He also won the gold medal for the best group of four canvases, all dealing with Ojibway subjects. That fall another event took place that was of great importance in his long career — he married Pearle M. Miller, a Minneapolis schoolteacher.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, Booth was on his way to establishing his lifelong reputation as a disciplined and productive artist. In October, 1923, he publicly attacked the stereotype of the artist and expressed his own practical dedication to his craft:

The accepted idea that an artist is an impractical person waiting for an inspiration is ridiculous. A painter who takes his work seriously — and he is the only kind that turns out good pictures — knows an inspiration when it comes, well enough, but he also knows that it is almost no use to him unless he has developed within himself an equipment that can use it.<sup>6</sup>

Cameron Booth was emerging exactly as the practical man he described. In November he had three paintings of Indian subjects in the Chicago Thirty-Sixth Annual Exhibition of American Paintings and Sculpture. His works drew praise not only from local reviewers but also from the French periodical *Revue du Vrai et du Beau* (*Review of Truth and Beauty*). Of "Chippewa Burial Ground," "Early Mass," and "Chippewa Mourners," the reviewer wrote: "These are three works of a grand style,

possessing much force, character, and intensity; these scenes of Indian life are extremely evocative; there is a remarkable breadth of composition, a vivid craft, bold and zestful, as well as an absolutely personal and original technique." In conclusion the writer characterized Booth as " . . . one of the most complete and interesting artists painting at this time in America."<sup>7</sup>

The Indian paintings that prompted these remarks were monumental achievements, the results of ideas developed in numerous sketches before their final realization in oil on canvas. Pearle recalls particularly Cameron's determination to render the lines of the folds of the Indian blankets in "Chippewa Mourners." Booth made drapery studies working from models, most often Pearle herself. She recollects today that it was insufferably hot sitting under those blankets for hours during the summer of 1923.

In 1924 Booth accepted a commission to do a series of eight murals for an insurance building in Nashville, Tennessee, depicting the early history of the region. Despite this commission and the value of his Leech Lake paintings as historical documents, his conception of art transcended its utility as a tool for documenting specific places and events. In October, 1924, he showed one of his Leech Lake works, "Tillers," in the Art Institute of Chicago's annual exhibition of American paintings and sculpture. This painting, which had been shown earlier in the year at the Carnegie annual exhibition in Pittsburgh, was clearly more than a direct representation of a local scene. Along with a number of works by other contemporary artists, among them New Yorkers George Luks, George Bellows, and Guy Pène du Bois, "Tillers" drew strong criticism from reviewer Eleanor Jewett of the *Chicago Tribune*:

Gallery 58 is the room of horrors. . . . Flocking is the most apt characterization of their grouping.

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<sup>3</sup>The Minnesota State Art Society was created as a "state commission of art" by an act of the legislature in 1903 "to advance the interest of the fine arts, to develop the influence of art in education, and to foster the introduction of art in manufactures." Minnesota was the second state in the union to create an art commission through an act of the state legislature. This exhibition had been an annual event since 1904 and was held each year through co-operation of the Minnesota State Fair. At the time of the 1922 show, artist Clement B. Haupers was serving as secretary of the State Art Society. See Minnesota State Art Society, *Bulletin*, 1:1, 6 (February, 1923).

<sup>4</sup>*Minneapolis Journal*, March, 1922, September 6, 1922, clippings in Scrapbook 1.

<sup>5</sup>Clippings, April, 1923, and September, 1923, in Scrapbook 1; *Minneapolis Star*, May 30, 1961.

<sup>6</sup>*Minneapolis Journal*, October 23, 1923, clipping in Scrapbook 1.

<sup>7</sup>"Cameron Booth," in *Revue du Vrai et du Beau*, April 10, 1924, p. 26, in Scrapbook 1.

Alone, the canvases might provoke ridicule, at least a smile would be permissible; together, they challenge any but a serious emotion on the part of the visitor and declare themselves, indeed, as part of a serious movement in the art of today.

However earnestly they may have been conceived and elaborated, heaven be praised that we do not have to like them.<sup>8</sup>

Critic Jewett's opinion notwithstanding, Booth's talent was attracting increased attention, even on the international art scene. Early in 1924 the French periodical *La Revue Moderne* published a major article on his accomplishments and associated his work with the modern movement in Europe:

Our most modern artistic theories have found many adherents in America. But they are not in any sense servile imitators. Very much to the contrary. One of the leaders is certainly Cameron Booth.

To illustrate the point, the article reproduced two of Booth's Leech Lake paintings, "Chippewa Mourners" and "Early Mass." The latter work would be purchased three years later for the permanent collection of the Newark Museum of Art.<sup>9</sup>

THROUGHOUT HIS LIFE, Booth wrote short theoretical statements concerning contemporary art. Although his painting evolved through several stylistic phases, he demonstrated remarkable consistency in his ideas about art. While identifying with the moderns, he minimized the revolutionary aspects of their work, bridging the gap with earlier periods by suggesting a link between modern art and ancient and primitive art. "Moderns," he argued, "are really old fashioned they have found that Greek, Egyptian and early Italian primitive art has more in common with their ideas than the groups closer as far as time is concerned."<sup>10</sup> At another time in 1923, he added: "I like to think of painting in its own inherent qualities, having a unique beauty brought about mainly through its own laws of order and unity, independent of representation and implied association."<sup>11</sup>

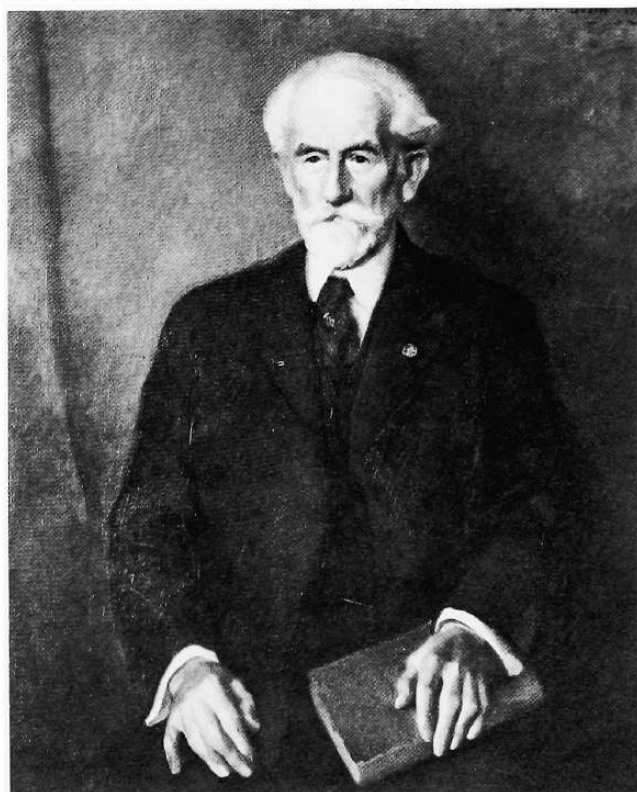
In 1925 Booth showed his work in the 120th annual exhibition at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia from February 8 to March 29. The academy purchased his canvas, "Horses" — the first Booth paint-

ing to be acquired for a major museum's permanent collection — through the John Lambert fund, "the income of which shall be used to purchase pictures from its [the academy's] Annual Oil Exhibitions by American artists." On a sheet pasted in his first scrapbook, Booth jotted, "'Horses' was purchased March 4th. Big day for Coolidge and myself!" President Coolidge was inaugurated that day. During the Coolidge administration, Booth's "Minnesota Lumber Camp," the painting presented at the 1922 State Fair, hung in the White House.<sup>12</sup>

In 1925 and 1926 Booth entered paintings in the Twin Cities Artists Exhibit at the Minneapolis Institute of Art and received top honors both years. Despite the regional orientation of the Twin Cities annual exhibits, they drew commentary from a reviewer in Boston's *Christian Science Monitor*. Referring to Booth's Indian paintings in the 1926 show, the writer observed: "His work possesses the true stamp of sincerity — the character of the locality in which he now lives and works."<sup>13</sup>

Always a practical man, Booth never allowed his interest in the theories of art to put him above some of the practical tasks of his craft. In 1925, with the urging of Minneapolis art critic John K. Sherman, Cameron Booth undertook a portrait of William Watts Folwell, the man chosen in a *Minneapolis Daily Star* promotion as "Minneapolis' Most Unselfish Citizen." Reflecting on the ex-

WILLIAM W. FOLWELL by Booth (1925)



<sup>8</sup>Chicago Tribune, November 9, 1924, Scrapbook 1.

<sup>9</sup>"Cameron Booth," in *La Revue Moderne*, January 30, 1924, p. 15, Scrapbook 1.

<sup>10</sup>Minneapolis Journal, October 23, 1923, Scrapbook 1.

<sup>11</sup>Mimeographed roundup of Booth's statements on art by various years, Scrapbook 5 (1967-1969).

<sup>12</sup>Minneapolis Journal, 1925, clipping in Scrapbook 1.

<sup>13</sup>Christian Science Monitor, October 14, 1925, clipping in Scrapbook 1.



perience, Booth distinguished the noted author of a four-volume history of Minnesota and the first president of the University of Minnesota (1869–1884) as “the most interesting portrait subject I have attempted.” He was so interesting, in fact, that, one day when Folwell was sitting for his portrait at the university, artist and subject lost all track of time and stayed beyond the hour when the building was locked for the night. As they tried to make themselves comfortable, anticipating a long night in Morrill Hall, they noticed a university official strolling on the Mall below, caught his attention, and were saved from their plight.<sup>14</sup>

In 1927 Booth visited Europe again, this time to study painting, first with André L’hôte and then with Hans Hofmann, who had been conducting an influential art school in Munich, Germany, since 1915. Spending the summer of 1927 studying with Hofmann on the Italian island of Capri, Booth was exposed to his teacher’s credo:

Creative expression is the spiritual translation of inner concepts into form, resulting from the fusion of these institutions with artistic means of expression in a unity of spirit and form. Imitation of objective reality is therefore not creation but dilettantism, or else a purely intellectual performance, scientific and sterile.<sup>15</sup>

As the dominant theme in his teaching, Hofmann stressed the dynamic and static potential of line and the tension with contrasting colors and planes. He urged his students to strive in their art toward a balance of “push and pull,” his well-known principle of composition for resolving essential tensions in a work. Full of the challenges posed by Hofmann, Booth returned to Minneapolis at the end of the summer to resume teaching at the Minneapolis School of Art. The appointment of Edmund Kinsinger of the Hofmann school in Munich to teach in Minneapolis during the 1928 spring semester was undoubtedly directly attributable to Booth’s experience of the previous summer.<sup>16</sup>

After nearly ten years of teaching at the Minneapolis School of Art, Booth left his post in the fall of 1929 to accept a position made vacant at the St. Paul Gallery and School of Art by the sudden death of Anthony Angarola, a promising young local artist and teacher who had been on the Minneapolis art school staff. After becoming director in 1931, Booth infused the St. Paul school and students with his characteristic energy and enthusiasm. In carrying out the dual responsibilities of teacher and artist, he did not allow one role to overshadow the other. While the school flourished under his leadership, he continued to pursue the ideas he had explored in 1927 with Hofmann. These ideas are evident in works like “Clam Bay Farm,” painted in 1930, in which the articulation of space is simplified with the various planes set forth in stark contrasts emphasized by color.



*IN A PAINTING CLASS* taught by director Booth (right, center) in the early 1940s, students at the St. Paul School of Art do portraits of an Indian model.

Booth served as director of the St. Paul School of Art throughout the Great Depression decade. Late in 1933 he also became involved with the federal government’s first relief program for artists, the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), headed in Minnesota by Russell Plimpton, then director of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. The program was conceived “to give artists employment at craftsmen’s wages in the embellishment of public property with works of art.” Plimpton appointed Booth chairman of a committee to review and select sketches submitted by artists on the theme, “The American Scene.”<sup>17</sup>

Prior to termination of this short-lived relief program in April, 1934, the institute exhibited a number of the works produced locally. A selection of some of the finest works produced nationally under the PWAP was shown at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., from April 24 through May 20. Among the paintings listed in the catalog were ten by Minnesota artists, including Booth’s “Filling Station.” Assistant Secretary of the Treasury L. W. Robert, Jr., commended the artist for his contribution to the PWAP, noting, “. . . fine as the

<sup>14</sup>Minneapolis Journal, 1940, and Minneapolis Daily Star, 1925, clippings in Scrapbook 1. Author conversation with Pearle Booth, August 7, 1980, in Minneapolis (Folwell anecdote).

<sup>15</sup>William Seitz, *Hans Hofmann*, 56 (New York, 1963), quoted in Rose, *American Art Since 1900*, p. 152. See Chronology in *Cameron Booth: 48 Paintings from 1946 through 1958*.

<sup>16</sup>Clipping, including Kinsinger picture, in Scrapbook 1.

<sup>17</sup>Public Works of Art Project, *National Exhibition of Art*, 2 (Washington, D.C., 1934), copy in Scrapbook 1.

Project is, there is nothing finer about it than the ample evidence which you have given of your devotion to your country. For, after all, that is what it amounts to."<sup>18</sup>

With the end of the PWAP, Booth worked on another project inspired by the federal program and established by University of Minnesota Dean Malcolm M. Willey, who employed several local artists to paint landscapes documenting scenes around the university campus. When the longer-lived Federal Arts Project of the Works Progress Administration (FAP/WPA) project was initiated in 1935, Booth was asked to lead it. He refused but recommended his colleague at the St. Paul School of Art, Clement Haupers, for the position. Haupers, Booth thought, not only had the necessary business and office experience but was a good artist as well. "Clem got the job," Booth reflected many years later, "and I was real pleased. He did a very good job. I've always avoided those kinds of things. It takes me away from my work."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup>National Exhibition of Art, 12; L. W. Robert, Jr., to Cameron Booth, February 1, 1934, letter in Scrapbook 1.

<sup>19</sup>George Reid telephone interview with Cameron Booth, August 2, 1977, in the Minnesota Historical Society, which has a transcript. Reid did this interview for the University Gallery.

<sup>20</sup>Raymond G. Gemet, dean of summer sessions at the University of California, to Cameron Booth, October 29, 1934; Glenn Wessels, "Cameron Booth Gouaches," in *The Argonaut*, July 12, 1935, both in Scrapbook 1.

<sup>21</sup>*San Francisco Chronicle*, July 14, 1935; *Oakland Tribune*, July 7, 1935, clippings in Scrapbook 1.

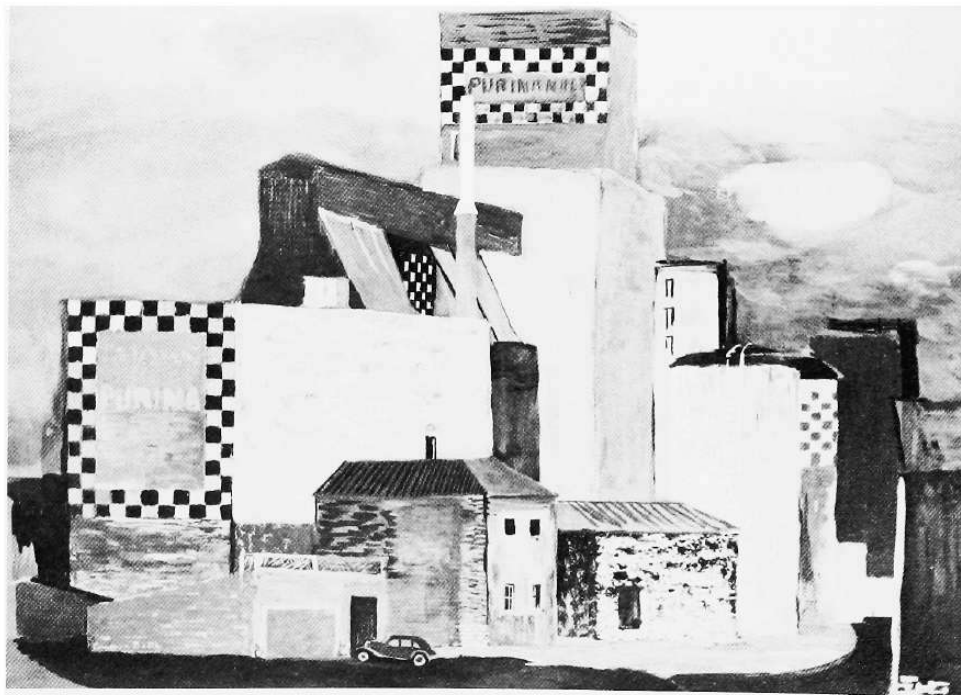
<sup>22</sup>A. Conger Goodyear to Cameron Booth, October 20, 1938, letter in Scrapbook 1.

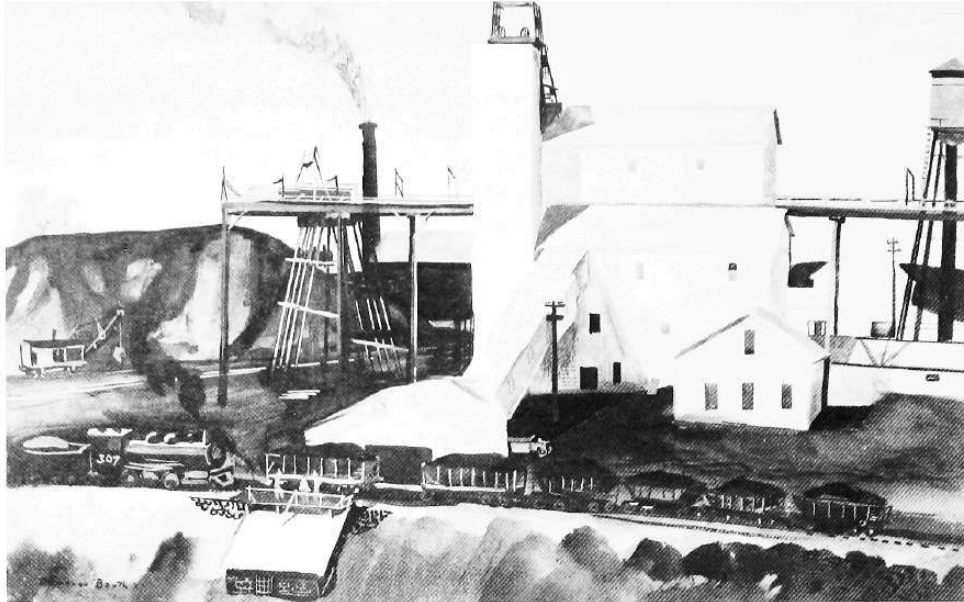
In October, 1934, Booth was invited to teach in the 1935 summer session at the University of California in Berkeley. He accepted and moved to California for what would prove to be a momentous few months. In July, 1935, the Paul Elder Gallery in San Francisco gave Booth his first one-man exhibition. It consisted largely of gouache water colors — "the ideal medium," Booth contended, "for free expression on the part of the artist who is unable to devote connected periods of time to his painting. It offers a wide range of technical effects, may be taken up again and again and worked over without losing its freshness."<sup>20</sup>

The show was comprised principally of Minnesota scenes, "reporting," noted a reviewer in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "on the facts of the Middle West, but it is also a fine, solid and lively art." The writer illustrated his point with a photograph of Booth's "Purina Mills," now in the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society. The San Francisco show, well received, inspired one critic to predict that Booth "should continue to contribute his share to the ever-growing stature of American art."<sup>21</sup>

Booth's contribution was formally recognized by the art establishment the next year when his "Street in Stillwater" was chosen for a traveling exhibit of works by forty artists to be shown in the Musée de Jeu de Paume in Paris. Organized by the prestigious Museum of Modern Art in New York, the show was described by the museum's president, A. Conger Goodyear, as "the first extensive presentation of the work of American artists ever made in Europe."<sup>22</sup>

"PURINA MILLS, MINNEAPOLIS" (1935) is one of sixteen gouache paintings of Minnesota scenes Booth presented the society in 1974.





"IRON ORE MINE" (left), a society-owned gouache of 1937, shows a familiar northern Minnesota scene of the 1930s.

"JUKES' FARM" (right), also a 1937 gouache in the society's collection, records another familiar type of Minnesota scene.

DESPITE THESE accomplishments, Booth continued to devote his energy to the St. Paul School of Art, showing his work in local exhibitions and inspiring art students with his enthusiasm. In a long article in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* in 1939, well-known author Grace Flandrau attributed the St. Paul School of Art's vitality to one man — Cameron Booth. "Any institution, but especially a school, and especially an art school, is never, if it is a good one, an institution, but a man," she wrote. "It is all the intangible as well as tangible attributes of his talent, his personality and especially of his character."<sup>23</sup>

Under Booth, the influence of the St. Paul Gallery and School of Art extended beyond the studio classrooms. He and his colleagues on the faculty showed their work frequently in public places such as the St. Paul Public Library. He explicitly challenged the traditional association of art and the social elite and the conception of the art gallery as a lifeless place: "I want the working man to come in his work clothes. I want the housewife to put down her ladle, lower the flame under her stew and visit the exhibit." He added: "If they like what they see, they can stay for hours. If they don't, they can dash right out again. Either way, they'll realize that here at least, is no 'graveyard.'"<sup>24</sup>

In 1942 Cameron Booth achieved a milestone in national recognition by winning the coveted Guggenheim award. The announcement of this prize came less than six months after the Minneapolis Institute of Arts had finally purchased one of his paintings, "Iron Mine," for the permanent collection. Booth left the St. Paul School of Art and used the Guggenheim fellowship to travel in the American West and paint. Despite national recognition, however, he was still regarded in some art establishment quarters as an artist of only regional significance. Martha Davidson, writing for *Art News* early in 1943, described Booth's importance in strictly re-

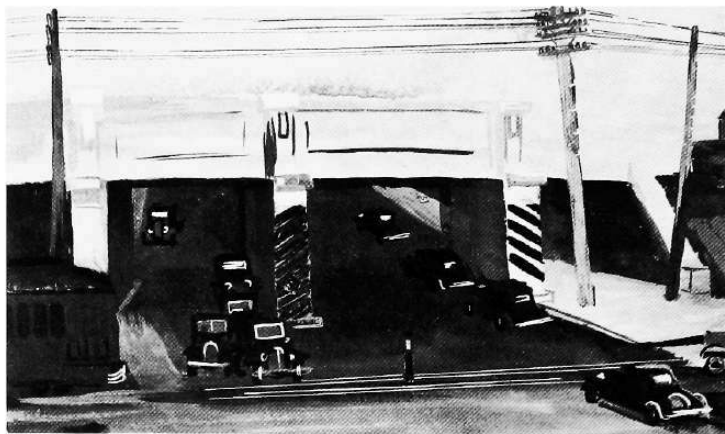
gional terms, noting that he "more than any other influenced the local artist's style, technique, and attitude." Though certainly complimentary, the review must have disappointed Booth, who some twenty years earlier had explicitly challenged the theoretical basis for a regional conception of art, arguing that art was ultimately "independent of representation and implied association."<sup>25</sup>

These words, written in 1923, took on new meaning in the 1940s and 1950s as Booth moved decisively toward a more abstract style of painting that clearly expanded

<sup>23</sup> *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, July 30, 1939, clipping in Scrapbook 1.

<sup>24</sup> Unidentified clipping of story by Eugene Cook, n.d., in Scrapbook 1.

<sup>25</sup> Russell Plimpton to Cameron Booth, December 31, 1941; Martha Davidson, "Regional Review: Minneapolis-St. Paul, 1943," p. 10, in *Art News*, January 15–31, 1943, both in Scrapbook 2 (1941–1958); mimeographed sheet in Scrapbook 5.







his work beyond the limits of regionalism into the broader context of modern art in general. This change was observable in the two Booth paintings — “Circus Horses” and “Shoshone River,” executed under the Guggenheim fellowship — included in a group show that opened in March, 1943, in the contemporary artists’ section of the Mortimer Brandt Gallery in New York. The show consisted of two works each by eight artists chosen, according to the brochure, “with two considerations in mind — the high quality of the artists’ works and the originality of their individual expression.”<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup>“Variety within a Group: 8 Artists, 16 Exhibits,” brochure of Opening Contemporary Exhibition at the Mortimer Brandt Gallery, March 29–April 17, 1943, in Scrapbook 2.

<sup>27</sup>*New York Herald Tribune*, November 28, 1943, clipping in Scrapbook 2.

<sup>28</sup>Cameron Booth, “Modern Art,” in *The League*, 4 (Winter, 1944–45), copy in Scrapbook 2.

In November the Brandt Gallery gave Booth a one-man show of seventeen paintings representative of his latest work. The reviews were favorable. A writer for the *New York Herald Tribune*, for example, observed that the show “confirms in both oils and gouaches the impression of an artist of taste and skill who knows what he wants to do, and does it very well indeed.”<sup>27</sup>

In 1944 Booth joined the faculty of the Art Students League of New York. Moving quickly to assert his position as an artist of more than regional importance, he contributed an essay, “Modern Art,” for the organization’s bulletin, *The League*. The ideas expressed in this piece were in large measure a restatement of what he said in 1923. As in that year, he argued the existence of the relationship between contemporary art and primitive and ancient art. What was new was his specific denunciation of the European representational art of the recent past:

To the modern artist it is clear that the so-called humanizing influences of 14th century Western art began as a decadence and spread as one. In early Christian work, representation was used as a means to an end. This means, then, became an end in itself until in the 18th century Academy the end was forgotten and only the means remained. Next, this means became so loaded down with rules for copying nature that all freedom of expression was lost.

He concluded, as he had in 1923, by declaring the independence of art from representation: “Certainly there are *more important things* than imitative copying that go into a work of art.” After twenty years, his patience with the idea of art as representation seemed substantially diminished.<sup>28</sup>

Although the 1944 message was not new, it was pointing Booth in a new direction. This was underscored in the article by the reproduction of an abstract painting by Booth to which he gave the ambiguous title “Inte-

**THIS CITYSCAPE**  
(left) — “Marshall and Snelling Avenues, St. Paul” — was painted by Booth in 1935 and now is owned by the MHS.



**AT RIGHT:** Booth’s version of “West Seventh Street, St. Paul,” a gouache (ca. 1935) also owned by the society.





*"TWO HUNTERS" (1974) is among several MHS-owned oils by Booth showing horses.*

*"SUMMER SOLSTICE" (1954), a colorful example of Booth's abstract style, was recently acquired by the society.*



rior." The new trend was clearly apparent to Minneapolis critic John K. Sherman. After a trip to New York as "Gallery Snooper," he reported that Cameron Booth "is venturing into abstraction. . . I hardly recognized the old Booth in his new style."<sup>29</sup>

AFTER FOUR YEARS in New York, Booth returned to Minnesota in 1948 and joined the University of Minnesota's art faculty. In 1949 his works were included in two Twin Cities exhibitions celebrating the Minnesota territorial centennial — the Walker Art Center's "Modern Painters in Minnesota" and the Dayton Company's "Centennial Minnesota." Booth's "Iron Mine Village" was one of twelve works commissioned for the latter exhibition and was shown first at Dayton's and subsequently at the Minnesota Historical Society, the State Fair, and other locations throughout Minnesota during the centennial year. The following year, the University Gallery organized a show of twenty-five of Booth's paintings to celebrate the University of Minnesota's centennial. Although the exhibit included the portrait of Folwell and the 1923 Leech Lake painting "Early Mass," it consisted mainly of abstract works done between 1946 and 1950.<sup>30</sup>

Three years later, Booth's abstract paintings were featured in a summer exhibition at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. The exhibition catalog included Booth's statement on the relationship of personal expression and the technique of painting in abstract art. It contained echoes of what he said in his 1944 essay and back in 1923:

My work is, I hope, traditional in the sense that it is supported by the same laws of structure, balance and order as the work of thousands of painters before me. I believe it is necessary to accept the limitations of the painter[']s means, to know them well and to make them one's own.

<sup>29</sup> *Minneapolis Star-Journal*, January, 1946, clipping in Scrapbook 2.

<sup>30</sup> Catalog, "Centennial Minnesota: As Seen by Some Notable Artists"; University of Minnesota, "Cameron Booth," December 11, 1950–January 7, 1951, copies of both in Scrapbook 2.

<sup>31</sup> Walker Art Center, "An Exhibition of Paintings by Cameron Booth," June 10–August 30, 1953, copy in Scrapbook 2.

<sup>32</sup> Undated review by John K. Sherman, clipping in Scrapbook 3. In the same review Sherman summed up Booth's penchant for changing styles: "He is by nature a thoughtful and ever-seeking artist, who paints with his brain as well as with eye and hand." *Cameron Booth: 48 Paintings from 1946 through 1958*, p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> Bertha Schaefer Gallery, "Cameron Booth," March 21–April 9, 1960, copy in Scrapbook 3.

<sup>34</sup> *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, February 1, 1960, p. 11, clipping in Scrapbook 3; typed list of places in Scrapbook 4 (1961–1966).

Personal expression, uncontrolled, is a silly thing. I do not underestimate the value of the accidental and emotional approach. I cultivate it. It is a valuable part of intuition, new ventures, new visions, new possibilities, drama and shock. However, before these can be full expressions they must be given power through the laws of composition (structure, balance, unity, etc.). Only then is the intent of the artist revealed.<sup>31</sup>

A more comprehensive exhibition of Booth's abstract paintings done between 1946 and 1958 opened at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts on October 29, 1958, as a joint effort of the institute and the Walker Art Center. Suggesting a link between Booth and the New York avant-garde exemplified by Jackson Pollock and others, reviewer John K. Sherman described Booth's paintings as being done in the "abstract expressionist style," having a "freedom that reaches ecstasy in their explosive and swirling colors." Still, Sherman noted, there were in these paintings "mechanics, the effective functioning, of the ingredients." Harvey Arnason, former director of the Walker, made a similar point in the catalog essay: "In Booth's abstraction of the last fifteen years there is always a clearly defined and easily perceived geometric harmony." Apparently, Booth's lifelong preoccupation with the laws of painting gave even his most abstract works an unmistakable order.<sup>32</sup>

Booth made his home in Minneapolis throughout the 1950s but continued to show his work in New York, principally at the Bertha Schaefer Gallery. The checklist for a show of ten paintings there from March 21 through April 9, 1960, was inscribed with another statement of Booth's basic conception of art. Although the underlying principles remained unchanged, Booth now emphasized the inner source of art and cast his ideas in more evocative and poetic language:

Insight replaces sight. The laws of nature replace imitative representation. As a plant grows, as a crystal forms, as the planets move, so develops a painting. By the same laws the poetic mystery of life is suggested.<sup>33</sup>

In 1960 Booth received a Ford Foundation award for a retrospective exhibition "to show the growth and development of his career." The show was sponsored by the American Federation of Arts and circulated to museums and art centers around the United States. After several months of preparation, a selection of forty Booth works from 1923 to 1960, including "Chippewa Mourners" and "Summer Solstice" from the society's collection, opened in Minneapolis at the Walker Art Center on May 14, 1961, and was given eighteen other showings through 1963 in such far-flung places as the Witte Memorial Museum in San Antonio, Texas, and the library of Bucknell College in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania.<sup>34</sup>



CAMERON BOOTH is pictured at the December, 1974, retrospective show of his works at the society.

Although the exhibition showed sharp contrast in Booth's work from the more representational paintings done in the 1920s and 1930s to the more ambiguous images of the mid-1940s and 1950s, Booth's friend Harvey Arnason drew back in the catalog essay from associating the artist's most recent works with abstract expressionism, "a term," Arnason complained, "which has become so all-encompassing as to be almost meaningless." Instead, he emphasized the consistency in Booth's painting over the years. "It is," he argued, "perhaps this romantic element . . . which forms the central thread of the artist's life." Arnason's analysis was astute in suggesting a continuum in Booth's art which was about to take yet another turn — away from abstraction to more realistic images, especially horses and what Booth termed "barnyard landscapes." A writer in the *Art Forum* noted the change:

The long career of Cameron Booth seems to have taken a full cycle. At least the most recent of his works, "Spring Thaw — 1961" and "Black Cow in Winter[.]" return to the image, echoing in many ways the years prior to World War II."

Booth himself provided a rationale for the change. Not surprisingly, he argued that painting has its own inherent qualities, not as representation or abstraction but, to quote his words of 1923, "having unique beauty brought about mainly through its own laws of order and unity."<sup>35</sup>

Bearing on this point is still another "statement about

*THE PHOTOGRAPH* on p. 104 is from The Saint Paul Gallery and School of Art, Season 1941–42, catalog in Scrapbook 2; the Folwell portrait (p. 103) is courtesy of the University Gallery; all others are from the MHS audio-visual library.

painting" that Booth wrote down on October 10, 1975, in his neat longhand. The statement reflected a further evolution in Booth's thought in which he sought a balance between the craft of painting, or technique, and painting as an expression of the artist's inner self. The artist as interpreter was key:

Whether abstract or representational, the first consideration of painting is, and should be, painting as painting, well within the tradition of painting as it has been practiced by hundreds of artists before us — from Giotto to Matisse.

Through these technical means the work becomes a heightened interpretation of the world about us and our inner feelings too.

I have been asked, "How can you alternate from abstractions to these landscapes and horses?" The answer is simply that they are the same technically, only for one thing [—] that is the representational works begin from drawings of the motif, while the abstractions grow rather automatically from one area of color and form to another[;] but — here again I insist on the laws of painting.

Perhaps even more surprising, I have painted many portraits.<sup>36</sup>

In December, 1974, the Minnesota Historical Society recognized Cameron Booth with a retrospective exhibition of twenty-six paintings representing his earliest works at Leech Lake to the most recent barnyard landscapes. The exhibition focused most strongly on the 1930s, during which the artist painted many local Minnesota scenes. The show's checklist included comments by MHS Director Russell W. Fridley, in which he described Booth's work as both historical documents and personal, aesthetic statements:

He gives us glimpses and images of his life and his particular awareness of it. Happily, the state of Minnesota has provided him with much of this inspiration. The works in this exhibition, while recognizable as local and historical subjects, are not photographic images. Rather, they show us our world through the eyes and brush of a man familiar with and sensitive to his surroundings.<sup>37</sup>

At the close of the exhibition, Booth presented the society with sixteen of the gouaches shown in it. These paintings form a strong core for the society's collection of approximately forty works by Cameron Booth — documents of Minnesota's past and of the career of one of Minnesota's major artists.

<sup>35</sup> H. H. Arnason, *Cameron Booth*, 22 (New York, 1961); C.P., in *Art Forum*, December, 1963; *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 14, 1964, clippings in Scrapbook 4.

<sup>36</sup> Booth's "A Statement about Painting" is in Scrapbook 7 (1973–1980).

<sup>37</sup> Minnesota Historical Society, *Cameron Booth: An Exhibit*, December 22, 1974–May 31, 1975.





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