The Artist as Chronicler

MARY TOWLEY SWANSON

uring a career that spanned four decades, Minnesota-born painter Dewey Albinson lived in Europe, Canada, and Mexico, as well as his native state. From the 1920s to the 1960s he portrayed friends and colleagues, foreign scenes, and the picturesque countryside west of Minneapolis in a style that emphasized geometrically simplified landscape forms. He is perhaps best known, however, as a painter of regional images, including a body of work that captures a vanishing way of life along Lake Superior.

Albinson saw himself as a descendant of the independent Vikings who roamed the woods, insisting on the rights of man and animal to coexist in a wilderness undestroyed by either. His unpublished writings, completed sometime after 1963 and before 1970, appeal for the protection of the northern Lake Superior region from the “progress” of roads and bulldozers, summer vacationers, and unscrupulous government agents. Toward the end of his life, Albinson apparently believed that the only way to preserve some memory of the Grand Portage area and its inhabitants was to write about his experiences, retelling the stories he heard when he traveled north to paint, first in 1922, then in

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1925, and during many subsequent summers until the early 1940s. 

Albinson's love of the Grand Portage area extended to other Minnesota wilderness spots, too, and his memoirs contain pleas to leave the woods and rocks untouched. Perhaps he felt that his paintings—themselves little touched by contemporary European and American stylistic movements of abstraction—were not always detailed enough to record these treasured vanishing images. Words as well as paints became weapons in his personal battle.

The artist's love of the outdoors was fostered early in life. Born on March 9, 1898, to the solid, middle-
Clockwise from top, left:
Figure 2. Mrs. Morrison, 1922
Figure 3. Witch Tree, ca. 1950
Figure 4. Grand Portage, 1922
Figure 5. Charles O. Roos, 1926
upper-middle-class family of O. L. Albinson, a staunchly Covenant Swedish immigrant who owned a furniture and funeral business on Washington Avenue in Minneapolis, Ernest Dewey Albinson grew up summering at Fagerness Bay on Lake Minnetonka. Two events that were to influence the direction of his adult life happened there during his childhood, probably about 1910. Boys who had stolen his bicycle shot at Albinson, wounding him in the leg. To pass time while recuperating, the youngster began to sketch, encouraged by two neighbors. One, Marsha Warren, gave him his first box of paints, brushes, and panels, and the other, Ethel Rundquist, a commercial artist, inspired him to consider becoming a painter. Albinson later wrote, "My neighbor Ethel... advised me to study design at the art school and then to study painting, after which I would go East—the art school was in the old library—which I never managed to attend due to illness."

The young Albinson was basically a loner who enjoyed playing his Klassen violin and painting in the

1*Forty Years of Paintings by Dewey Albinson*, exhibition catalog, American Swedish Institute, Minneapolis, Jan. 9-Feb. 13, 1955; Albinson, unpublished memoirs; Minneapolis Tribune, June 14, 1970, *Picture Magazine*, 66. An undated newspaper clipping, kept in a scrapbook belonging to Elmer Albinson, Dewey's brother, reported that "Dewey Albinson, 12 years old... was brought to the Swedish Hospital early today and a bullet was removed from his left leg below the knee... The wound is slight and the boy will recover." Albinson's family believed that this episode brought on his bout with rheumatic fever a few years later, forcing him to drop out of school.
attic studio of his parents' home. Or, after going outdoors to paint, the adolescent artist would place the fresh canvas on the living-room floor and scrutinize it while pacing back and forth, playing his violin. Minnehaha Creek, Winter, competently painted at this time before he entered art school, shows muted, pastel colors placed with impressionist brushstrokes. 7

When friends went to movies, Albinson would go to Walker Art Gallery on Hennepin Avenue and Eighth Street to study the painting techniques of exhibited works. In an interview some 55 years later, he recalled being greatly impressed by a Swedish exhibit of "boldly splashy paintings, some done with a palette knife." 8

In 1915, after recuperating from rheumatic fever, Albinson entered the Minneapolis School of Art, recently relocated to the basement of the newly built Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Reminiscing about his help with moving plaster casts from the old to new quarters, he recorded that "to my horror, I was the only fellow in the class of about 35 to 40 girls . . . . I somehow did not mind because I was already conditioned to be painting alone, going out as often as I could." 9

After graduating from art school in 1919, Albinson won a scholarship to the Art Students League in New York City. Before attending classes at the league, the young painter spent six months studying at Woodstock, New York. There, he claimed that he came "under the sway of many masters and many theories and departed confused." A village concert program from September, 1919, advertised an "Exhibition of Paintings by Ernest Dewey Albinson." Canvases from this period probably drew influences from the pastel-colored impressionist views of John F. Carlson, a nationally known teacher who lived at Woodstock and who had perfected a technique for designing mosaiclike daubs of color forming trees, hills, and fields. Albinson's scenes of woods and snow display flatly shaped trees, their shadows, and snow-covered hills in pinks, golds, and muted blues.

On his subsequent year at the Art Students League there is little documentation. Soon thereafter a reporter characterized his time as "a series of shifts and transfers from one class to another, learning a lot in his own fashion and painting, always painting."

DEWEY ALBINSON returned to Minnesota in 1921 to portray subjects from Taylors Falls, a favorite area of his since student days at the Minneapolis School of Art. "When I had some extra dollars, I took the train to investigate, and will never forget the sight of the expanse of the St. Croix Valley when the train passed a bend. It was hard to believe what I saw. Never had I been so impressed with rugged nature, and the subjects I could see to paint. . . . By 1922, I am sure I had painted over one hundred works from this area."

Like the popular American regionalist writers during the 1920s, whose boosterism both satirized and eulogized rural America, Albinson vigorously defended the inspirational beauty of nature in his home state. In 1923 he told a reporter for a national arts magazine that he was sure "there is no place in America in which it is better to paint than Minnesota," revealing that the St. Croix area offered "the most gorgeous autumn scenery that the north country affords." Just one year earlier, Albinson declared that "I had visited the Catskill mountains in New York, a region which has long been a Mecca for artists. The Catskills are beautiful, but I found the rugged, peaceful solitude of the Minnesota hills even more charming." He concluded that "It will not be many years before this state will become a magnet for great numbers of artists who now flock to beauty spots in the East and along the Pacific coast."

Taylors Falls attracted the artist, in part, because "the stores and buildings of the town were clustered interestingly together so I could paint them from different angles, near and far." Albinson depicted the agglomeration of shapes comprising Pioneer Street—a butcher shop, blacksmith's shop, house, and skewed telegraph poles silhouetted against the distant banks of the St. Croix River. He also painted Charles Roos (fig. 4), son of Oscar Roos, one of the first permanent Swedish settlers in Minnesota. Albinson described him as "local poet, Charley a gifted fellow who wrote much about the valley. Many times Charley read his poems to me. Later I quoted some to Carl Sandburg who said, 'It is good, possibly sometime they will be recognized.'"

Returning repeatedly to the St. Croix River valley from the late 1910s through the mid-1940s, Albinson wrote that "I have painted in many small towns, and have learned of their goings on, but none ever compared to the life, color and drama that was Taylors Falls." In 1933 a group of Minneapolis women donated his vigorously brushed St. Croix Rapids to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, where it remains in the perma-

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1 Elmer Albinson interview with author, Minneapolis, 1975, notes in author's possession.
2 Minneapolis Tribune, June 14, 1970, Picture Magazine, 66-68.
3 Albinson, unpublished memoirs.
5 Albinson, "Taylors Falls."
7 Albinson, "Taylors Falls." The painting of Pioneer Street is in private possession.
nent collection. Albinson reported that he painted the canvas after tiring of “too much niggling studio work.” As a local magazine reported it, he threw his paints into the back seat of his Ford just as “the ice was breaking up on the St. Croix. He sat himself on the Wisconsin side of the river, blew on his fingers and started to paint.”

After his last view of the St. Croix valley area in the mid-1960s, Albinson complained bitterly about the effects of the agencies and people he called nature-butchers: “Of the tragedies, the greatest I found upon my last return; the beautiful glen had been literally ‘blasted to hell.’ Gone was the ‘fat man’s squeeze’ and the gorgeous rocky ledges. The trees were splintered, looking as though a war had passed through the area. One embankment was rebuilt with the sharp, blasted rocks in the usual ‘pseudo-rustic’ style.”

Arriving on the mail boat at night, when it was “pitch black and cold,” Albinson lodged in a small house, awakening the following morning to his “first glimpse of Grand Portage, a row of whitewashed log cabins near the waterfront. From each chimney rises a long, thin column of smoke against the distant dark blue mountains. I stand there entranced by the bleak beauty.” Renting a boat, the artist rowed out toward the Susie islands, noting, with growing excitement, the “cedars, pines and even the brush between the moss-covered rocks adding variety; below is the deepest blue water I have ever seen. In the distant bay are more cliffs, topped with a ridge of small saw-tooth mountains that disappear in the far north.” Mulling over the lonely scene of water, rocks, and gulls, he wondered: “The complete wilderness is overwhelming; how can I live here?” Like an answer, “a blue boat comes out of a nearby hidden cove.” The fisherman in the vessel, Leonard Hendrickson, whose picture Albinson painted later that summer, offered to rent a small cabin “perched on the left bank, about twelve feet above the water’s edge.”

Within days of his arrival, Albinson heard about a fabled tree in a nearby cove. With no clear vantage point, he sketched its bottom half from his boat, then clambered up the bank to draw the top, describing it sitting on “a mass of rocks which project out from the bank. The hollow trunk spirals up to a few strong branches, topped by a scraggily mass of foliage.” Declaring that it was “incredible that this wind-twisted old cedar can have stubbornly braved the elements for perhaps four hundred years,” he recounted stories he had heard that “in the old days, the Indians would portage across the point back to a gully to avoid passing the tree and the Evil Spirit that lives in it and . . . dared only approach in large groups, drumming and singing, and bearing gifts of tobacco with which to appease the Evil Spirit.” The tree and its history clearly captivated the artist, who later claimed to be the first to name it the Witch Tree, in 1922. Albinson’s first painting of it was displayed in an exhibition of his work at the Minnesota Historical Society in February, 1923. He made a second oil of the tree sometime in the 1920s, a third in 1942, several pastel sketches in the 1930s, and a fourth painting in 1950 (fig. 3). He sadly observed in

ALBINSON’S lifelong love of the St. Croix area paralleled his feelings for the Grand Portage wilderness. His treks to that region began in early March, 1922, when he headed up the North Shore of Lake Superior in a fishing and mail boat, America, which inched from cove to cove so that fishermen could sell and load their catch as well as pick up their mail. An engineer named Smith, who knew the lake well, suggested that Albinson visit Grand Portage.°

°Albinson, “Taylors Falls”; “Institute Plum,” Golfer and Sportsman (Minneapolis), July, 1933, p. 16.
°Albinson, “Taylors Falls.”
°Here and below, see Albinson, “Grand Portage,” 5, 6, 7. Susie islands is a local name for the cluster of 12 islands in Lake Superior near Grand Portage. Susie is the largest of them; Albinson renders it as “Souci Island.” See Warren Upham, Minnesota Geographic Names, Their Origin and Historic Significance (St. Paul: MHS, 1969), 146.
1963 that "as I have studied some photographs taken of the Witch Tree, I realize that the rocks were broken off about ten years ago. Yet no one seems to realize the difference or make any comment."'

During his first spring at Grand Portage, Albinson approached John Cramer, or Jean Clément, a 90-year-old Indian, to pose for him. The artist cautiously courted his subject by first painting a picture of his whitewashed cabin. While he was working, Cramer's sister, Mrs. Walkatub (see inside-back cover), apparently upset by the intrusion, ran out of her nearby cabin shouting what the artist took to be insults. Albinson ignored the woman, claiming she acted on "an old Indian superstition" that being painted would cause one to lose a day on earth. When he finally persuaded a young child to introduce him to Cramer, Albinson noted that the old man's hands were chapped and cracked. The artist returned the next day, bringing a gift of homemade bread. He massaged Cramer's hands with a mixture of cold cream and lanolin—the same he used to clean paint from his own hands. When asked a second time to pose, Cramer agreed.¹⁴

Albinson later wrote that Cramer "was all I had expected and more, bronze skin, big nose, small eyes, and a rather tall stature . . . . He talked in an even tone, in what seemed like poetic prose, this impression of a poet made stronger by a fine shock of black hair." While posing on an old iron bed, Cramer would recite tales he had learned from his grandfather, who recalled French and English traders. One hot day, Cramer fell asleep while sitting. According to Albinson, he awakened and looked at the painting, commenting, "Neba Nishinobe" or "Sleepy Indian," and the work became known by that name (see cover).

During that first season at Grand Portage, Albinson also painted portraits of two Indian sisters, Mrs. Spruce and Mrs. Tamarack, both widows. They lived in an old log cabin but sometimes stayed in two nearby birch-bark dwellings. Among their traditional skills, the women wove mats and baskets in the old way. Although the women did not relate stories, both told Albinson that they survived the winters by moving inland and trapping animals for fur and meat.¹⁵

The artist described his sessions with the first of his two subjects: "Mrs. Spruce was noble and sat with

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¹³Albinson, "Impressions of the Vanishing Northwest," 7c. He has somewhat dramatized the local story of Manito Geeshigayne, or Spirit Cedar. According to Indian sources, Ojibway people and voyageurs regularly left offerings of tobacco near the tree to ensure safe passage on Lake Superior; see, for example, Grand Portage Local Curriculum Committee, A History of Kitchi Onigaming: Grand Portage and Its People (Cass Lake: Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, 1983), 75.

¹⁴Here and below, see Albinson, "Grand Portage," 13-14.

¹⁵Albinson, "Grand Portage," 17.
great dignity as I painted her in front of one of her matted cedar bark rugs. I worked on the painting three afternoons.” Although her sister posed for only one hour and walked away before he finished, Albinson later exhibited Mrs. Tamarack in several national shows. In 1925 Clyde H. Burroughs, curator of American art at the Detroit Institute of Arts, called it “one of the finest Indian portraits I have ever seen.”

IN JUNE, 1922, Alvin C. Eastman joined Albinson at Grand Portage for what was planned as a two-week visit. Eastman had helped to catalog the Asiatic collection at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts the previous winter and wanted to see the wilderness before returning to his Boston home. Intending to stay only until the next mail boat, Eastman remained for the next three months, exploring the old Fort Charlotte and Grand Portage area, a prime fur trade site. The two friends found the remains of an old dock and cellar hole along the Pigeon River while hiking in the border country. Back at Grand Portage, Albinson discussed his findings and shortly thereafter received a letter from Solon J. Buck, director of the Minnesota Historical Society, who hired the two men to clear and chart the Fort Charlotte site. At the end of three months of work, Eastman as well as Albinson had matured with the seasons: “By fall we both looked rugged, Alvan [sic] more so as he had grown a beard, left untrimmed.”

One night that summer Eastman and Albinson were awakened by the sound of a large, black boat, sporting “a diabolic set of iron jaws set to rip out the accessible boulders.” Albinson ran out to water’s edge, screaming at the boat to stop “destroying the beautiful shoreline.” Disappointed, he realized that he “had succeeded only in moving the beast from one point of destruction to another.” Later that summer, he learned that “another boat entered the shallow end of the bay, equipped with a large suction apparatus, and before long the sand from the bottom was loaded onto the boat. The whitefish, having lost their spawning ground, have now left the bay.”

Fishing was a staple of the area’s economy, and fishermen were part of Albinson’s milieu from his first introduction to Grand Portage. His memoirs recall vivid impressions: “When the fishermen came in with the boats loaded with fish there was quite a job to bring them into the fish houses—though some fish houses had

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a small, horizontal opening built out . . . where the fish could be shoveled or thrown in and then cleaned. I was fascinated at the speed in which they could clean fish. Using a sharp round bladed knife they would slit the side of a herring and on the back stroke remove the guts, then shove it into the box below ready to be shipped." In addition to the portrait of Hendrickson in his rowboat, the artist recorded Lake Superior fish houses in wood block during the 1920s. An undated oil on canvas (fig. 6) captures a different view of the same subject.  

Albinson typically spent from one to five hours on a canvas daily, often reaching painting sites on foot or by canoe. He was quoted as saying that "It was impossible to carry canvases in some of those places. Only thing to do was to put my things in a canoe and paint from the water. Shores are beautiful up there. Fires haven't reached them yet and the color is wonderful." The art-
ist often clambered around the cliffs at dusk, seeking subjects. The fishermen, he wrote, thought he was crazy and used to yell out warnings, but, Albinson countered, "Little did [they] realize that I found my best subjects at this hour, for nature then separates into massive contours, the sky and water against the rocks." He claimed that at twilight "Nature takes on a golden hue which contrasts with the cool shadows . . . . However, I prefer the early morning light in cool greys, just as the forms begin to reveal themselves."39

Visual images were still fresh when the painter wrote his memoir some 40 years later: "From my shack I can see Pigeon Point where the foliage has turned the birch to a bright yellow. A black bear passes, making a purple spot in contrast." He reflected on his animal companions, although he did not paint them. "I have been seeing deer swimming in the bay, and also a bull moose, his head high like an antlered lord." And again, "Sketching from a high elevation, I see some deer below, gracefully hurling one windfall after another."31

Albinson stayed at Grand Portage into the fall of 1922 and returned during succeeding summers through the early 1940s to indulge his love for "beauty come in vastness . . . a small cliff with its sheer block-like planes, moss-covered boulders, some clinging cedars, and then the changing deep-water tones below." Lake Superior Landscape, a film made by his brother, Elmer, in the early 1940s, showed his method of working. First the painter applied a cool undertone, then a warm series of colors worked over and scraped with a palette knife. Albinson enjoyed his artistic solitude, noting, "As I began to be surrounded by my paintings, I found myself singing and reciting poetry and talking to myself, a habit which comes from living alone." When an inch of ice appeared in his wash pail in the morning and he began to feel frozen at night, Albinson would leave the Susie islands for another season.32

Although the artist usually remained at Grand Portage into the late autumn, he left early in August of 1926 to visit Red Lake Reservation. His memoirs describe a scene that he also painted (fig. 1): "In a wood-land there were long rows of little ridge roofed burial houses about five feet long. . . . painted in bright colors. Others were in neglected weather-beaten greys." At a ceremony nearby, he noted "no less than fifty Indians were gathered [eating] . . . . wild rice, wild duck, and hominy" after a speaker had paid tribute to the deceased. "The whole scene moved before us like a slow moving pantomine."33

**GRAND PORTAGE** and the St. Croix area supplied Albinson with a set of motifs that recurred in his work through the early 1940s. National critics were more enthusiastic about his canvases from the 1920s and early 1930s, however. In the 1920s Albinson used a modified version of cubism that emphasized the basic geometric forms in every scene he painted. In 1923 reporter Grace Polk wrote in *International Studio* that "he moulds every rock . . . . he piles up shapes like the cubist, but, with these various impulses expressing themselves in details, his larger sense is always for the effect of the composition as a whole." Her long article, "Albinson of Minnesota," included a prediction from Anthony Angarola—then a painting instructor at the Minneapolis School of Art—that "There is a man who in a few years will be known as one of the great artists of America." Twelve years later, Minneapolis art critic John K. Sherman wrote that Albinson would be recognized within a decade as one of "America's dozen great artists." Sherman described him as a painter "who outshines Grant Wood by several dozen kilowatts."34

Sherman's and Angarola's predictions never materialized, although Albinson achieved a measure of recognition, placing his canvases in national and regional exhibitions. In the fall of 1922 his scenes from Grand Portage and the St. Croix toured midwestern galleries under the auspices of the Milwaukee Institute, and they were displayed in February, 1923, at the Minnesota Historical Society. Later that year his work was included in the annual exhibition of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. The artist won the gold medal and sweepstakes award for *Mrs. Tamarack* at the Minnesota State Fair in 1925, also showing it at the Detroit Institute of Arts in the spring of 1926 and in the 1927 exhibition, Paintings and Watercolors by Living American Artists, in Newark, New Jersey. Twenty-two of his canvases traveled from the Art Institute of Omaha to the University of Oklahoma in 1926; and *Shacks and Snow*, 1922, picturing Swede Hollow in St. Paul, toured Scandinavian museum sites in 1930 as a part of the Exhibition of American Art, under the auspices of the American-Scandinavian Foundation and the American Federation of the Arts.35

The painter's overriding interest in regional scenes—from rural Lake Superior to Taylors Falls—served as a prototype for other Minnesota artists, such as Elof Wedin, who took up the banner of regionalism.

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31 Albinson, "Grand Portage," 102.
33 Albinson, "Grand Portage," 52.
fully a decade later. Albinson’s muted pastels and earthen colors covered a freshly conceived idea: that Minnesota had “wooded hills fairer than the far-famed Catskills of New York ... a coast line as rugged and beautiful as the much touted rock-bound coast of Maine ... rivers more colorful and lovely than the stately Hudson and its palisades.” In the 1920s and early 1930s, Albinson’s enthusiasm created aesthetic documents from midwestern views; his later paintings often appeared to be retreaded versions of area landmarks, overlaid with more facilely executed brushstrokes.

To picture the artist as a recluse who spent his time in isolation, painting Minnesota scenery, however, would be one-sided and incorrect. Albinson played an active part in the local arts community, traveled throughout Europe, married Evelyn Antoinette, a Duluthian, in the mid-1920s, lived in various areas of the United States, and spent his last years in Mexico. In fact, immediately after his first seasonal sojourn at Grand Portage in 1922, he set sail for France, “to get the real tradition of art ... where it had its beginning.” Grace Polk reported that “When he has learned what he can do in Paris, he is going back to Minnesota ... to do ‘some big work.’”

DURING the 22 months he studied with the cubist painters André L'Hote and Roger Bissiere in Paris, Albinson took ideas from the more abstractionist tendency in European painting, modifying them to fit the prevalent American vision of realism. He returned to Minneapolis in 1924 to paint and make wood-block prints of the immigrant clusters such as Swede Hollow in St. Paul and the Bohemian Flats in Minneapolis. These works clearly show a blocklike simplicity in the composition of shapes—an influence from the late-19th-century work of French painter Paul Cézanne, whose style touched numerous European and American artists in the 1920s and 1930s. Albinson rendered these communities in muted pastels, darkened grays, and warmed earthen colors. In two separate reminiscences he also wrote about the picturesque Bohemian Flats, a community of Czechoslovakian immigrants situated along the Mississippi River beneath the present-day West Bank of the University of Minnesota. “Above them the heavy traffic passed all day, while below along the river bank was the village, a quaint setting with its little church in the center.” After the settlement was razed, he recorded, “I cursed the coal heaps every time I saw them, for they destroyed the ‘Bohemian Flats,’ which ... had the good fortune to be recorded in a charming little book written ten years ago for the W.P.A. Writers’ Project.”

Albinson served as head of the painting department at the St. Paul School of Art from 1926 to 1929, during which time he also painted scenes along the Mississippi River bluffs above St. Paul. He then took his wife and two small daughters to Italy, where he worked from 1929 to 1931. He returned to New York City to exhibit at the Delphic Studios in 1932. St. Paul reporters cheered his success. “If the New York show goes well, the Albinsons may be established in the East for a time. Mr. Albinson’s canvases are commanding better prices and he is recognized as one of the important young American painters.”

New York Times critic Edward Alden Jewell hailed the Delphic exhibition as having a “fresh robustness.” Helen Appleton Read of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle commented that the artist’s paintings were “warm, rich statements of the Italian hill country redolent with the feel and smell of sun-baked earth,” which “offered Mr.
Albinson excellent subject matter for an exposition of his interest in the juxtaposition of geometric forms.” A critic in the national periodical Creative Arts, however, complained that Albinson’s work was beginning to show painterly shortcuts and wished that the artist had continued in the genre of Shacks and Snow from the previous decade. And painter and writer Erie Loran, a former Minnesotan, thought it unfortunate that the Delphic Studios exhibition showed mainly Italian scenes, because regionalism was the current vogue in America. To this Albinson gave a typically pithy reply: “Hell, I’ve painted every outhouse from Minneapolis to Canada.”

The paintings from this exhibition represented the apex of Albinson’s national career. Rural Abruzzi toured nationally in the Art Institute of Chicago’s Circuit Exhibition in 1933; Storm in the Laurentians was shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York; and Rural Abruzzi and Italian Vendor were included in the exhibition, Paintings and Sculpture by Scandinavian-American Artists at the Germanic Museum, Harvard University, in 1933.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION brought increasing economic pressures, and Albinson moved back to Minnesota. In the summer of 1932, he painted scenes of the northern part of the state, probably commissioned by a local railroad company. By December, 1933, he was participating in the New Deal’s newly formed Public Works of Art Project. Along with about 30 local artists he brought in his weekly quota of oils, gouaches, or watercolors to be evaluated by Edmund Kopietz, director of the Minneapolis School of Art; painter Cameron Booth, who was at the time director of the St. Paul Gallery and School of Art; and painter Alexander Mashey. The project lasted a frenetic four months, during which time completed works were shown in continually changing exhibitions at private galleries, public buildings, and in several rooms at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Albinson’s Northern Minnesota Mine was included in the culminating exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., in April, 1934.

From May to the middle of June, 1934, the University of Minnesota hired Albinson and fellow artists Elof Wedin, Arnold Klagstad, Stanford Fennell, and Syd Fossum to paint scenes of its Minneapolis campus, giving them studio space in a large loft in the old student union. Cameron Booth, Malcolm M. Willey, a university dean, and Hudson Walker, director of the University Gallery, evaluated the weekly allotment of either three watercolors, three gouaches, or an oil painting. Albinson painted 1000 University Avenue in the dark, brushy style reminiscent of then-popular French painter Paul Vlaminck. Continuing with that artist’s more liquid style of painting application, Albinson rendered the dark-colored shapes of iron range towns in northern Michigan later that summer.

The federal government’s numerous work projects helped sustain Albinson through much of the decade. From 1935 to 1937, he served as state director for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) art centers, which were part of the educational division of the recreational and state handicraft project. This appointment probably stemmed from the painter’s early advocacy of Minnesota scenes, his teaching experience at the St. Paul School of Art, and his published opinion that local schools should collect the work of Minnesota artists. In this period a reporter described him as “state head of the art educational movement,” who, as “dean

1000 University Avenue, 1934
of Minneapolis artists, is kept so busy that he has little
time to turn out any of those fine pastels which have
been attracting a great deal of attention of late." During
the first four months of 1935, Albinson taught
drawing in Minneapolis at the Sexton Building, under
the auspices of the State Emergency Relief Act. When
SERA folded, the WPA funded the project until it was
incorporated into that program's school on Harvard
Street in 1937. 14

Albinson, who "was always active in things around
town," according to Cameron Booth, was on the board
of directors of the radical Minnesota Artists Union,
which was comprised of artists who worked for the
WPA. He later helped to found the more conservative
Minnesota Artists Association, serving as its president
from 1937 to 1939 and 1941 to 1942. Members of the
latter organization met at the Rainbow Cafe in Minne­
apolis for dinner and conversation. A reporter de­
scribed conversations with the artist in the mid-1930s:
"Next to painting hills and sky and houses, Albinson
excels in talking . . . . And his talk has none of the
cliches of stop-gap dialogue. He will tell you about the
neglected masters of the late Renaissance . . . he will
regale you with anecdotes of Rabelaisian tinge, taken
from life; one moment he will lead you through the
mazes of pigment chemistry, and in the next will give a
withering word portrait of a New York art 'authority'
or a rapacious Italian landlord." 15

Probably seeking a more Europeanized environ­
ment, Albinson and his family moved to Quebec in the
late 1930s. Canvases from this period, shown in 1940 at
the Charles Morgan Gallery in New York, won a critic's
description of "fresh and strong" color painted with
"controlled forthrightness." Bringing a regionalist vi­
sion to bear on Quebec, he painted city scenes with a
cubistic emphasis. 1 6

After separating from his first wife in the early
1940s, Albinson spent winters in Miami, where his fa­
ther had a vacation home, and summers in Grand Por­
tage. During these years his love of conversation and

humorous observations gained him a variety of friends,
among them Alrik Gustafson, chair of the Scandina­
vian department at the University of Minnesota; poet
Carl Sandburg (with whom he used to ride the rails,
according to Albinson family lore), whose portrait he
painted; and writer Sinclair Lewis. Albinson's and
Lewis's friendship was based, in part, on environmen­
tal concerns. When the author lived at Lake Minne­
tonka, a newspaperman told him about plans, which
Albinson strenuously opposed, to build a road through
the Grand Portage area. The painter and the novelist
met briefly and Lewis became intrigued by Albinson's
description of local characters. "We had hopes," wrote
Albinson, "that he would write an article or even a
book about the country and so bring out the impor­
tance of keeping this corner of the state [Grand Por­
tage] free from roadways and exploitation." 17

Albinson married Miami painter Myra Cerutti in
1947, and they moved to Lambertville, New Jersey, to
live and work in a renovated farmhouse—just down the
road from the Swedish-born painter B. J. O. Nordfeldt,
whom the Minnesotan had met in 1933 when Nordfeldt
taught for a term at the Minneapolis School of Art.
Although Albinson sent paintings back to Minnesota,
he did not return there to live. In 1952 the family
moved to Mexico and built a house near Tepic. View­
ing this new locale with the eye of a painter, Albinson said,
"Our town is not the most picturesque in Mexico, but it
does have an excellent climate. There is much of the old
Mexico left to keep life interesting: the small town fiestas,
fantastic displays of fireworks." The painter freely
brushed light earthen colors onto canvases depicting

Sinclair Lewis viewing Albinson's St. Croix
Rapids at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1946

14Dewey Albinson, "Creating Art Collections in Our
13-14; Minneapolis Journal, Feb. 9, 1936, p. 5. Albinson's
exact title during this period is unclear. Roy A. Boe, "The
Development of Art Consciousness in Minneapolis and the
Problems of the Indigenous Artist" (Master's thesis, Univer­
sity of Minnesota, 1947), 156-157, used the title cited here,
while Syd Fossum called him "state art director of the educa­
tional division of the WPA"; Fossum interview.

15Cameron Booth, tape-recorded interview with Melvin
Waldofgel, 1971, transcript p. 31-34, in MHS; "Minneapolis
Profiles," Shoppers Guide (Minneapolis), May 18, 1934, copy
in Minneapolis Public Library, Minneapolis Collection.

16Art Digest, May, 1940, p. 10; Magazine of Art 33 (June,
1940): 387.

17Albinson, "Grand Portage," 94-95.
Albinson at Grand Portage, 1963

Albinson at Grand Portage, 1963

caricatures and exhibiting them in Minneapolis at the Studio Gallery, Marque Music Manor, and the Dewey Albinson Gallery. While Albinson had used figures to obtain a sense of scale in his earliest canvases, these silver-toned works contained an awkward melding of large cartoonish figures and barren landscape.

DEWEY ALBINSON was afflicted with a form of paralysis in 1969, while returning to Minnesota from Mexico. When he could no longer use his legs, he painted by sitting on a dolly, which he wheeled around to canvases. Bedridden early in 1971, he continued to sketch until he was too weak to use his hands. The artist lay dying in the early spring of 1971, his paintings surrounding him. He acknowledged his pictorial strength, focusing on Minnesota scenes, in essays written in his last years. In an interview given when his paintings were exhibited at the Minnesota Historical Society from October 13 to November 24, 1963, the painter reflected: "I can at least say that my works are part of the rugged nature that I have depicted and that now is a thing of the past."


the Mexican countryside, which were exhibited at the Harriet Hanley Gallery and the American Swedish Institute, both in Minneapolis, throughout the 1950s.

During that decade and into the next, Albinson began his series on Don Quixote, painting the characters from the Cervantes novel in taupe-and-ocher-colored

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