If you’ve grown up in the midst of it, Minnesota culture is like oxygen. You aren’t aware that it’s there—you just breathe it, and it sustains you. When you’ve just arrived in the oxygen-rich environment, though, you notice things more sharply.

So it was for Karal Ann Marling of Rochester, New York, one of the people who taught me how to “see Minnesota.” In 1977 Marling came to the University of Minnesota with a double Ph.D. in American history and art history. She taught art history and American studies to two generations of students until retiring in 2008. During that time, she became an expert on Minnesota culture and history, published numerous books about the state—including a history of the state fair—and served as a popular spokesperson on all things Minnesotan.

She no doubt was familiar with this photograph of two nattily dressed gentlemen posed in the Minnesota State Fair art exhibition sometime in the 1880s. This picture may strike us as odd today, when we are more familiar with legions of Minnesotans in shorts and t-shirts scrutinizing artworks in the Fine Arts Building. We might think it extremely strange that taxidermied animals were displayed alongside academic paintings. To see art hung near the ceiling, salon-style, also contradicts our contemporary exhibition aesthetic. Yet Marling would have understood the display and its ties to places like James J. Hill’s art gallery on Summit Avenue and the fledgling Minneapolis Institute of Arts, at that time located in downtown Minneapolis.

The photo underscores some continuity, too. Minnesotans are proud of their artists and arts institutions. This scene was notable enough to be doubled and sold as a stereograph. People bought these as souvenirs to scrutinize in 3-D perspective in their parlor stereopticon or to send to friends and family. In a way, then, this image is the equivalent of the popular postcards of Claes Oldenburg’s and Coosje Van Bruggen’s Spoonbridge and Cherry in the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden that Minnesotans love to purchase and send today.

As Marling informs us in Blue Ribbon, her history of the state fair, the Fine Art Exhibition was one of the first places where a broad swath of Minnesotans came into contact with traditions of high-art painting and sculpture. Rather than being old fashioned, this image shows us Minnesota as a place of progressive refinement.

—Colleen Sheehy

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