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# The 905 Murals at the Haggerty Museum

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# Introduction

## THE 905 MURALS AT THE HAGGERTY MUSEUM

In an age when the art discoveries of antiquity and our European heritage have been well explored and documented, art historians and museums are increasingly turning their attention to the possibilities of undiscovered treasures of American art. A growing interest among collectors also heightens the search for unknown American art of high quality.

The discovery of this important cache of twenty-two large murals by Joe Jones (1909-1963) and James Barre Turnbull (1909-1976), in a Saint Louis warehouse in 1984, has led to their premiere museum showing at Marquette University's Haggerty Museum of Art. This exhibition for the first time brings to the attention of art scholars, critics, and the public an important body of previously undocumented American Regionalist murals depicting such scenes as workers in the grain fields and visitors at a county fair. A viewing of the murals at a Saint Louis warehouse in 1984, arranged by Mr. Marvin L. Fishman, convinced me that the murals would make an important contribution to the Museum's collection. The murals were subsequently given to the Haggerty Museum by the Victor Packman and Leo Rothbarth families of Saint Louis.

The murals were commissioned between 1936 and 1938 by Morris Multin, head of a chain of 905 liquor stores that reopened shortly after the end of prohibition, for installation in his stores on Market and Cherokee streets in Saint Louis.<sup>1</sup> Packman rescued the murals from imminent destruction in 1946 when the stores were being dismantled. They remained in a warehouse from 1946 to 1985 (except for a brief period of restoration work begun in 1971) until their removal to the Haggerty Museum in 1985.

The Haggerty Museum set of Jones and Turnbull murals includes twenty-two from an initial twenty-four murals. Among the works are Jones's *The Story of the Grain*, four murals completed in 1936 and intended for the 905 store on Market Street; Turnbull's *County Fair*, six murals completed between 1937 and 1939, also for the Market Street store; *A Day in the Country*, seven murals completed in 1938 for the 905 Cherokee store; *Industrial Missouri*, five murals, a probable second series for the Cherokee Street Store, 1937-1938; and a study for a Post Office mural not intended for 905. Jones's *Riverfront*, originally a part of the 905 murals, is in the collection of the Jefferson National Expansion Museum in Saint Louis, and Turnbull's *Swinging in a Tree* is lost.

The murals are the works of artists whose careers spanned periods of radical social activism and subsequent collaboration with leaders of American industry. Jones, the better known of the two artists, was a champion of workers' and artists' causes in Saint Louis during the 1930s. He subsequently lent his talents to the leaders of American industry for other purposes. Turnbull's career follows similar directions.

As Karal Ann Marling has noted in her essay, the 905 murals were produced at a moment of emerging national success for Jones and one of promise for Turnbull. These murals signaled a major change in direction for Jones, whose images soon found their way into *Fortune*, *Look*, *Time*, and other mainstream American publications. For a time, Turnbull assumed Jones's role as a leader of the radical Regionalist artist movement, but he too eventually followed Jones's transition to other more conventional artistic pursuits.

The works shown in the Haggerty Museum exhibition are largely devoid of adverse social commentary. Although the 905 murals were produced in the midst of the Depression era, they show farmers engaged in meaningful work in a vast and bountiful natural setting. As depicted in these murals, people of all ages appear to be enjoying life while fishing, pitching horseshoes, watching horse races, and taking in the wonders of a country fair. The 905 murals were created under the aegis of a private patron whose purposes perhaps would not have been served by images of radical social protest.

Jones and Turnbull belong to an important tradition of midwestern Regionalists whose ranks include Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood. Like their fellow Regionalists, Jones and Turnbull depict episodes of midwestern, agrarian and city life. Their striking murals also suggest links to other mural artists such as Diego Rivera, and artist-critics of society such as Ben Shahn. If these images of farmers at work and play are conceived with less transcendent aims than the aims of the Dutch burghers or the ecclesiastical patrons of Rome, they nevertheless belong to an established tradition of western painting that dates from the Baroque era and before in Europe.

Despite their widespread prominence in the 1930s and 1940s both in the midwest and across the nation, Jones and Turnbull have been largely forgotten. Except for a few specialists in American art and cultural history of the 1930s—and art dealers who specialize in the art of this period—few will remember Jones's and Turnbull's impact on the art of the times. Nevertheless, these artists and their works are a significant part of the "American Wave" aesthetic of the 1930s, which offered a noteworthy alternative to the aesthetics of modern art radiating from Paris. Their explicit social commentary, and regional or local subject matter set them apart from the main stylistic concerns of abstract modern art.

There is no doubt that the time is right for a new look at the mural art of the 1930s as represented in the 905 murals. A resurgence of figuration in the new realist art of the sixties and seventies has once again sharpened our eyes and minds to the possibilities for appreciating realism in art. Although the aesthetic issues differ—social realism in the 1930s murals versus commentaries on the nature of art itself in the new realism of the 1960s and 1970s—the imagery of such new and revived realism helps to prepare viewers for a second look at the

social realism of the 1930s and heightens our appreciation of the recurring significance of figurative mural art. The resurgence of mural art and graffiti art in recent decades also reminds us of the important communicative functions of mural art in public or semi-public spaces.

More recent developments of Romantic Post-Modern art in the 1980s, with images incorporating natural and urban landscape, nostalgic references to past moments in art and life, and contemporary popular culture also help to set a climate for appreciating the mural offerings of the 1930s. While the Post-Modern Romantic images require a more complex reading, resulting from a change in aesthetics, these works reestablish certain artistic conventions necessary to read the 1930s murals: that is, a belief in the validity of representational subject matter and of art with a social message that concerns life outside of art itself or the art world.

This exhibition is also the occasion for a major publication on Jones and Turnbull. Karal Ann Marling's essay, "Workers, Capitalists, and Booze: The Story of the 905 Murals," prepared at the request of the Haggerty Museum for this exhibition, is the first full-dress treatment of Jones and Turnbull, and of the shifting relationship between the political left and corporate America in the period around World War II. It offers a new interpretation of Regionalism and of Thomas Hart Benton's place in his own region. The Museum is grateful to Professor Marling for lending her excellent scholarship to this project. Her essay has contributed immensely to our scholarly understanding of the context and importance of these artists and the 905 murals. Most importantly, her spritely prose has enlivened our interest and appreciation for the murals and artists.

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1. According to Mr. David Kay, current president of the 905 stores, the original 905 stores were founded as Schneider's 905 in 1885, at 905 Franklin Avenue in Saint Louis. Operations ceased in 1919 and resumed upon the repeal of Prohibition in 1933 at 905 North 12th Boulevard. This information was also reported in the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* on December 7, 1986.