

Basic Detail Report



Title: The Stallion

Date: 1937

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@3e13e

Medium: Oil and tempera on canvas on board

Description: "The Stallion" was of special significance to the Kansas-born Regionalist in that it marked his return to the Middle West after an absence of many years. Upon his arrival in Madison, Wisconsin, early in 1936, to become the University of Wisconsin's first artist-in-residence, he announced that the "vital experience" of his work would continue to come from within, from the "heart," rather than from the dictates of an art movement. (1) The Sublimity of nature, not only that of terrifying storms, but also that of undaunted animals, had repeatedly inspired him from the time he was a boy on his father's stock farm. Therefore, the stock pavilion of the agricultural college, just a stone's throw from his campus studio, immediately became a favorite haunt, as reported by his biographer, Laurence E. Schmeckebier: "When Curry first arrived, he headed straight for the stock pavilion on the agricultural

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campus and spent several weeks sketching the giant stallions that were being groomed for the coming stock show." (2) His initial painting of this subject matter takes the viewer into a large flag-hung interior as an anxious "ag" student leads a sleek, curried and braided, prancing black Percheron stallion out into a dirt-floored arena to be presented to the crowd. In dramatic contrast to the bright ornamental bells along the mane and over the knotted tail, the horse's rolling eyeball, the handler's white shirt, and the deep blue-green blackness of the horse's coat dominates the composition. The red stripes overhead complement the green of the pier in the left foreground and further enhances the drama of the scene. During the late-Depression years, draft horses, which were still in use to work the fields, continued to attract Curry's imagination. They first appeared in his early interpretations of "nature sublime" as early as 1924, when he was living in Westport, Connecticut. In the watercolor, "The Lightning" (1924; private collection), he silhouettes a stunned farmer and his trembling team against a bright bolt of lightning striking a tree. Five years later, in "Storm Over Lake Otsego" (1929; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), a team of horses rear and twist and turn in their harnesses as the farmer fights to regain control of them. In "Sanctuary" (1935; Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia), one of his last major works of the Westport period, a rain-soaked horse is surrounded by a tight cluster of farm animals, stranded on a circular patch of land in a flood. In "The Stallion", the great horse nervously emerging from a shadowy runway into the limelight was the culmination of Curry's love of animal vitality. As a follow-up, he painted "Belgian Stallions" (1838; National Academy of Design, New York), a version of Rosa Bonheur's magnificent "Horse Fair" (1853; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), one of his favorite works. A stock pavilion oil and tempera, it masses four powerful brutes rumbling out from beneath the stand, their attendants barely in control. The straining head of the lead horse resembles that of a gnashing stallion who stands on his hind legs to get the better of a jackass in "Stallion and Jack Fighting" (1932; Minnesota Museum of American Art, Saint Paul), one of Curry's most violent scenes. Fellow Regionalist, Grant Wood, wrote with regard to Curry's consistent thematic tendency: "It was action he loved most to interpret: the lunge through space, the split second before the kill, the suspended moment before the storm strikes. He remembered the facts accurately." (3) At the top of one of his most peaceful compositions, "Social Benefits of Biochemical Research" (1941), a mural for the Biochemistry Building at the University of Wisconsin, a draft horse rears its mighty head against the wide-open sky, as if having heard a sound, alert to the constant fluctuations of nature. Basic to the central, aesthetic instinct of Curry's "vital experience" this culminating statement draws upon "The Stallion", an indelible emblem of his lifework. JMD Bibliography: Laurence E. Schmeckebier, John Steuart "Curry's Pageant of America" (New York: American Artists Group, 1943); Sylvan Cole Jr. and Laurence Schmeckebier, "The Lithographs of John Steuart Curry: A Catalogue Raisonné" (New York: Associated American Artists, 1976); Joseph S. Czestochowski, ed., "John Steuart Curry and

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Grant Wood: A Portrait of Rural America" (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1981); Sue M. Kendall, "Rethinking Regionalism: John Steuart Curry and the Kansas Mural Controversy"(Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1986); Patricia Junker et al., "John Steuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West", exhib. cat. (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1998). NOTES: 1. Schmeckebier, "Curry's Pageant", p. 296. 2. Ibid., p. 131. 3. Quoted in James M. Dennis, "Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture" (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), p. 168.
Dimensions: Frame: 31 3/8 x 37 3/8 in. (79.7 x 94.9 cm) Image: 24 3/8 x 30 1/2 in. (61.9 x 77.5 cm)