

Basic Detail Report



Title: Sentimental Ballad

Date: 1940

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@3f24f

Medium: Oil on Masonite

Description: About 1937 Wood joined the Associated American Artists, a highly successful New York firm that promoted American art to the general public through inexpensive mail-order lithographs. Between 1937 and 1941 Wood made nineteen lithographs for the company. As Wood's exclusive New York dealer, the firm also landed Wood a number of commissions from commercial patrons, including Abbott Laboratories and the American Tobacco Company. One of the most extravagant of these projects was a commission for Walter Wanger, a Hollywood film producer. In May 1940 Wood and eight other leading American painters, including Thomas Hart Benton and Raphael Soyer, flew to Hollywood to paint the actors and scenes from *The "Long Voyage Home"*, a 1940 film directed by John Ford based on four one-act plays by Eugene O'Neill. Wood's painting illustrates a scene at the end of the film, when seven slightly inebriated sailors on shore leave sailors (played, from left to right, by John Qualen, John Wayne, Barry Fitzgerald [seated], Thomas Mitchell, Joseph Sawyer, David Hughes, and Jack Pennick) get teary-eyed while singing a familiar song in a pub. Wood himself acknowledged that "Sentimental Ballad", which incorporated seven portraits, was the "most ambitious painting he [had] ever attempted."⁽¹⁾ To accommodate his usual meticulous, slow working method, Wood painted from photographs and film stills; in contrast, the other artists used live models and reportedly finished their paintings within a few weeks. Wood changed the composition slightly from the actual scene, accenting Barry Fitzgerald by seating him alone at the table and changing a few of the poses. His low vantage point reproduces the view of the movie audience: the table edge is drawn at eye level,

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and the actors tower over the scene. The composition includes a few dizzying angles, contrasting a long horizontal format with the dominant vertical lines of Wayne's towering pose, Qualen's flute, Mitchell's scarf, and Pennick's striped trousers. Like the film itself, which was shot in black and white, the painting is mostly dark, somber browns and blacks predominating, yet it is enlivened by a few colorful accents, including Wayne's pink tie and checkered coat and Fitzgerald's bright blue polka dotted tie. Basically conceived as a publicity stunt for the film, the project received a great deal of attention in the popular and art press.⁽²⁾ While neither the film nor the paintings created for it were hugely successful, the project itself was seen as a novel way of opening up new opportunities for artists. The works were shown in New York in 1940 at Associated American Artists, then toured American museums. Writing for the New York "Times", Edward Alden Jewell found most of the paintings of average quality, though Wood's canvas "one of the best of the lot: done in a humorous, flavorsome, quasi-photographic manner."⁽³⁾ In contrast to Jewell's positive review, Emily Genauer, the critic for the New York World-Telegram, wrote that Wood's painting contained "superb draftsmanship" and "realistic perfection," though these attributes caused the painting to lack the more important qualities of "emotional depth" and "textural richness."⁽⁴⁾ "Sentimental Ballad" is not one of Wood's best-known works, probably in part because its theme is not directly related to the Regionalist style for he was famous. The painting is, however, representative of the numerous commissions he executed for commercial patrons, and United Artists' choice of Wood is indicative of his fame in the 1940s. MAS Bibliography: Darrell Garwood, "Artist in Iowa: A Life of Grant Wood" (New York: W. W. Norton, 1944); James M. Dennis, "Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture" (New York: Viking Press, 1975); Wanda Corn, "Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision", exhib. cat. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); Nan Wood Graham, "My Brother, Grant Wood" (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1993); Brady M. Roberts, James M. Dennis, James S. Horns, and Helen Mar Parkin, "Grant Wood: An American Master Revealed", exhib. cat. (Davenport, Iowa: Davenport Museum of Art, 1995).

Dimensions: Frame: 36 1/4 x 62 1/2 x 3 in. (92.1 x 158.8 x 7.6 cm) Image: 24 x 50 in. (61 x 127 cm)