

Dallas Museum of Art

LONE STAR REGIONALISM:

THE DALLAS NINE AND THEIR CIRCLE, 1928-1945

This exhibition celebrates many things. It celebrates the accomplishments of a remarkable group of local artists who came to national prominence by forging an artistic expression on the values of regional character, tradition, self-reliance, and opportunity. Although it is the work these artists produced that is exhibited, it would not have been possible without the activities of a larger group of men and women who believed that a region like Texas was ready and willing to assert itself in the American cultural mainstream -- to not only participate, but to create something that would ~~form~~^{form} a unique part of this culture. Artists, writers, editors, teachers, and many others contributed to a flowering of the arts in Dallas that culminated in the notable accomplishments of the Texas Centennial Exposition of 1936. Not the least of these accomplishments was the opening of an art museum and educational facility that became the envy of the region, if not the entire country. This exhibition celebrates the survival of that remarkable community spirit recently evidenced in the formation of the downtown Arts District in Dallas and sure to be seen again when 150 years of statehood are celebrated.

The newly housed Dallas Museum of Art, the anchor of the future Arts District, owes its philosophical inception as a community center to the spirit that helped establish the previous museum at a time of severe social uncertainty and economic upheaval. In other words, this exhibition celebrates something larger than individual artistic accomplishment: it recognizes the existence of a regional cultural spirit that formed an important part of the larger American experience in that era.

The exhibition's title refers to the specific group of artists who made it happen, the general aesthetic to which they subscribed, and the period in which they worked. None of these elements, however, is narrowly limited. There were more artists than simply nine, and the make-up of the principal nine changed somewhat, expanding and contracting during the period under discussion. Nonetheless, the major artists of this circle were referred to as "the nine" or the "Dallas Nine" at several points throughout this era and were carefully distinguished from older groups in Dallas and from all other Texas groups. Thus, it seems appropriate to use the name they were given at the time. Moreover, these

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artists did adopt a somewhat unified aesthetic outlook. Several were very active as writers and as interpreters of what their colleagues were doing. Yet, to their credit, these artists were strong enough to evolve individual styles which offered significant variations on the general aesthetic concepts they all held.

The principal artists in the exhibition include Jerry Bywaters, Alexandre Hogue, Otis Dozier, William Lester, Everett Spruce, Charles Bowling, Florence McClung, and Octavio Medellin. All of these artists are still alive, and were very cooperative with information on their work and accomplishments in this period. It was a rare and valuable opportunity to assemble primary research on an important phase in Texas art history.

To characterize their beliefs about art and its purpose it has been decided to use the term they most often used: regionalism. But their regionalism was very different in many respects from the art-historical concept we have come to know, for regionalism was a diverse system of beliefs in the 1930's, based almost exclusively on sociological developments in the period. The Texas regionalists were aware of these developments and became a part of them. It was shown that what they created was not as art-historically narrow as the American scene movement, but had more to do with the regional artist's relation to his or her environment -- not only the land, but the people as well. Texas regionalism had more to offer than a shallow artistic nativism and that without the artists' pioneering accomplishments there would be little foundation today upon which a city could seek to create the largest urban arts district of its time.

The opening of the new Dallas Museum of Art in the proposed arts district heralded the expansion of the cultural activity of a great city to an international scale. The museum's educational commitment to the public, and its place as a city institution, is due in large part to the initial accomplishments of the Dallas art circles of the 1930's. Amidst the current growth of the museum to one of world-class stature, the museum's existing collection of and commitment to the art of Texas should not be forgotten. Visitors today are able to see this work from time to time, presented as a part of the cultural fabric of the region. It is an artistic legacy about which they can feel a justifiable sense of pride.