

An Eye For Beauty: A Retrospective Exhibition Featuring Artwork by Carl Wm. Peterson

**Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery
Lindsborg, Kansas**

November 8 through January 24, 2015



“We met at the Gallery” is a common refrain among those who called Carl William Peterson friend. The Lindsborg resident had gotten his start at Bethany College studying with the Swedish-American artist for whom the Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery is named. After teaching in the Kansas public schools for sixteen years, Margaret Sandzén Greenough asked him to help run the Gallery, which had opened its doors in 1957 just three years after her father’s death. As a Co-Director, Peterson enjoyed interacting with Gallery visitors, telling stories on Sunday afternoons and guiding youngsters through new exhibitions. After retiring from the Gallery in 1981, Peterson kept a studio in the Sundstrom

building in downtown Lindsborg where he drew and painted every morning, honing his technique and producing a large body of landscape watercolors. This retrospective exhibition pulls together more than 80 pieces lent by Carl Peterson’s numerous friends and relations around the region. The earliest work in the show is a watercolor done when the young artist was attending Lindsborg High School and there are also a few examples of oil paintings executed in the recognizable Sandzén style, dating from his Bethany College years, 1938-1942. Known as a proficient watercolorist, Peterson’s favorite views to paint were autumnal Smoky Valley landscapes and wintry snow scenes with pink and orange skies.

Early History

Peterson’s grandparents were among the many Swedish immigrants who came to America and settled in the Smoky Valley of central Kansas. Carl was born in Fremont very near Lindsborg, on September 22, 1919. Lindsborg resident Lan Nelson had parents who both grew up with Carl Peterson in the small township. Lan’s mother and Peterson were classmates at Fremont Country School and they were known to pair up for “wheelbarrow” racing with Carl taking the part of the barrow. Lan’s father was confirmed in the New Gottland Lutheran Church in McPherson alongside Carl.

Peterson attended Lindsborg High School where he took art classes and began making a name for himself as a young man with potential. He always felt that his art teacher there, Elise Penner a former student of Birger Sandzén, had great influence on his career. The earliest work in this exhibition is a watercolor of an old cabin, completed when Peterson was in high school before graduating in 1937. Carl was always musical as well as artistic, playing the piano and singing in the Bethany Lutheran Church over



Untitled [bridge at Maxwell Game Preserve], 2002, watercolor and ballpoint pen on paper, collection of Ryon Carey



Untitled, circa early 1940s, watercolor on paper, collection of Jon and Lila Levine

most of his life. At age sixteen he began singing in the annual Messiah Festival concert and continued more than forty years. In a taped interview Peterson recalled a dramatic incident when a fellow tenor set the back of Carl's choir robe on fire, following too closely during a procession with a lit candle.

Bethany College Student 1938-1942

Carl Peterson accomplished much in his four years at Bethany College, learning from the internationally-respected Birger Sandzén (1871-1954). Peterson's style changed dramatically as he emulated Sandzén's methods and effects. From that point forward Carl arranged his landscapes with Sandzén's signature S-curve composition, but depictions of trees and rocks eventually lost the obvious Sandzén student stamp. Peterson joined the Prairie Water Color Painters that Sandzén had begun in 1933 and exhibited with the group regularly, which provided valuable experience for the budding artist. Peterson's great-nephew Jim Dahlsten remembers his uncle as "quite a character" and has lent the circa



1941 photograph with Birger Sandzén (seated at right) and Carl Peterson (seated to his right) in a Delta Phi Delta meeting held at Sandzén's studio

1940 oil painting *Summer's Prelude* to this exhibition. This work is very much in the Sandzén landscapes style, and could very well have the artist brushstrokes added to the work. Peterson's untitled still life of 1938 on display that was done in his freshman year was only kept because Sandzén's brushwork is readily seen, left from the professor demonstrating proper techniques directly on the work.

Sandzén was an exceptional mentor to countless students, organizing high school art competitions and awarding impressions of his own prints as prizes, and encouraging them field. He founded a chapter of the art fraternity Delta Phi Delta at Bethany College in which Carl Peterson served as the society's president for local meetings. Sandzén often took students to Colorado and in the summer of 1938 Carl was able to go along. He painted the red rock formations of Garden of the Gods near Colorado Springs. Peterson greatly enjoyed the dramatic Colorado landscape, and would revisit often in later years, pursuing a graduate degree as well as for vacations.

Professional Career

After relatively brief stints in Osborne and Hays, Kansas, Carl Peterson settled in Salina to teach art in the school district. He began at the junior high, but was rapidly promoted to a position at Salina High School. Peterson was a dynamic instructor and well-liked by his students. Taking a page from his own educational experience, he made the effort to organize art exhibitions for his students at the high school, at local events such as county fairs, as well as collaborating with K-State art professors in Manhattan for regional shows. He furthered his own career by attending graduate school at the University of Colorado at Boulder to earn an MFA degree in 1951. Peterson's charming watercolors of a pair of otters date from this period. While at the university Carl created a handful of lithographs, including *Rushing Water*, *Ghost Town*, and *Gallardia Daisies*. He had tried zinc plate lithography while under Birger Sandzén's tutelage, and was fortunate enough to have a few designs printed professionally by Theodore Cuno at the Ketterlinus Company in Philadelphia. An untitled landscape of cottonwood trees drawn in the Sandzén manner and printed by Cuno is included in this exhibition.

Peterson had always dreamed of studying in New York and in the summer of 1960 he was able to attend a short course at Columbia University. Two watercolors capturing urban views with pigeons are on display, an untitled scene outside Grant's Tomb and the colorful *I Hate Pigeons*. The latter is an unusual example of abstract composition, rarely seen in Peterson's paintings.

Director at the Birger Sandzen Memorial Gallery

Just as Carl Peterson signed a new contract for the 1963-64 academic year, he was invited by Margaret Sandzen Greenough and her husband Pelham to join them at the Sandzén Gallery as a co-director. The Salina school district superintendent encouraged him to follow his heart when he had the chance and the new appointment was announced in the *Salina Journal* on September 10, 1963. His warm welcome encouraged visitors to enjoy the exhibitions and to stay and get acquainted.

By the 1970s, many people had met Carl Peterson by visiting the Sandzen Gallery for the first time. Steve Gustafson, now music professor at McPherson College, recalls striking up a new friendship while visiting when a Bethany student. Gustafson would often play the Gallery's Baldwin piano, and the two men would go on outings around the region together. The watercolor *Wilson Lake* of 1969 was done from sketches collected when Gustafson accompanied Peterson on a tour of the Lucas, Kansas, area on a 10-degrees-below-zero day in winter. The piece was always a favorite of Carl's, who liked to visit his watercolor at the Gustafson home where it has been on view ever since.

Tim Johnson was another music student who fell under the Sandzén Gallery's spell when Peterson was at the helm. Johnson came in so regularly between the end of class and late afternoon music lessons that he became a Gallery assistant, learning all about the collection and the varieties of art from painting to glass creation while doing odd jobs needed. Just as Carl Peterson collected examples of all the local artists and then some, Johnson has also developed deep interests in collecting some of the arts and crafts he was introduced to while on Gallery duty.

Ken Leander, now of Assaria, had Carl as a high school teacher in Salina, but continued the friendship on a more equal footing when he began working in the community. Sunday afternoons were perfect for visiting Peterson at the Gallery to see the new art works, and the two men would often have tea chosen from Carl's wide selection of flavors. Leander remembers Carl frequently fielding series of phone calls from Margaret as she recalled things to check on for smooth running of the Gallery. Ken would sometimes help Carl deliver art back to artists and owners after shows closed. Ken has collected many of Peterson's works over the years, especially those with personal ties such as scenes painted from the Leander family over the decades. Landscapes of the Maxwell Game Preserve and its McPherson Lake appear in Carl Peterson's oeuvre on a regular basis, as his own family's farm was nearby.

Carl's sister Gladys Peterson (1904-2003) lived in Lindsborg as a well-respected professor of elementary



Untitled, 1978, watercolor on paper, collection of Tim Johnson

education at Bethany College. When Carl accepted the Gallery position he moved in with her and they got along very well over the years, giving each other "space" to entertain their own circles of friends as well as sharing activities. Gladys was known as a very good cook but Carl's forte was decorating. While teaching in Salina he would often be in charge of the committee for high school prom decorations, and he headed the volunteers for Christmas decorations in Bethany Lutheran Church for 50 years. Carl's favorite color was orange, and he decorated his room in the Peterson home in light woods with orange accents, as well as the trim on the exterior of the house. He even tried to have Bethany Church painted orange, but after a trial wall was done the congregation decided it was too pinkish and that they did not care for it.

After years of seeing paintings given away to Carl's friends, Gladys expressed the desire to have a work of her own. So, in 1985, Carl painted a beautiful, full-sheet scene of an icy river in winter just for her. That piece hung in the Petersons' dining room until being moved to



The Old Mill, Lindsborg, 1993, watercolor on paper, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Emory J. Carlson, Chatham, New Jersey, in memory of Miss Ester Levin and the Levin family of Lindsborg, Sandzén Gallery.

Bethany Home. A plaque was added that reads: “As a Token of Love to My Sister Gladys Peterson 1904-2003 Painted by her brother Carl Wm. Peterson.”

A Lindsborg Treasure 1981-2009

Peterson retired from the Gallery in 1981 and kept studio space downtown Lindsborg in the Sundstrom building on Main Street, hanging his blue Dala horse nameplate on his second-floor room. His intent was to draw and paint most mornings to hone his craft. Working so prolifically, he found that once a painting was complete, he was generally anxious to be rid of it and get on to the next idea. Carl either gave it away or placed for sale in the Bouquet Shop, also on Main Street. He also volunteered his free time to oversee the Bethany College art collection, beginning the inventory process of assessing and keeping track of the hundreds of objects acquired since 1913 when the Smoky Hill Art Club was established.

Carl Peterson often gave sunflower or Kansas landscape paintings as gifts for weddings and graduations. The artist penned the words to the Bethany College fight song to give to Steve Gustafson on his graduation in 1971. Friend Ryon Carey was given a watercolor landscape when he graduated more than twenty years later. Jan and Randy Clark got to choose from three different landscape watercolors when they were married in 1969 and have enjoyed the autumnal scene lent to this exhibition ever since. Jan had been working for Carl at the Sandzén Gallery for several years while a student at Bethany when the couple got engaged.

When Rose Marie and Mike Wallen moved to Lindsborg, they chose Bethany Lutheran as their home church because of Carl Peterson’s noticeably fine voice in the choir. Friendship grew as the Wallens visited the Gallery and Rose Marie established her own printmaking studio. Today, she continues to volunteer as a Gallery docent, sharing art and local history with Soderstrom Elementary students and a variety of groups that come through Lindsborg. When the Wallen’s



Untitled, 1983, watercolor on paper, collection of Kenneth and Linda Leander.

daughter Miriam was learning filmmaking at the University of Kansas, she put together a documentary, *1919*, pairing the reminiscences of her grandfather and Carl Peterson who shared a 1919 birth date.

In the 1980s and ‘90s, Maj-Britt Hawk would take her Soderstrom Elementary 4th-graders on field trips to Carl Peterson’s studio. He demonstrated watercolor techniques quickly brushing

trees Lindsborg scenes, and then gave the sketches to Hawk to take back to the classrooms. She collected and pinned the drawings up in the classroom over subsequent years as a preview for new students what would go on. Carl would occasionally visit the school as well, telling the children about his experiences teaching and being a Sandzén art student during America’s Great Depression. The 4th grade also got to visit the Sandzén Gallery every month. Salina resident Michael Chambers attended Soderstrom in the 1980s and appreciates the unique opportunities he was given. He recalls, “Growing up in Lindsborg I had the privilege of being surrounded by great art and amazing artists. We were fortunate to have art education in public schools always! Every year, every grade...My 4th grade class spent one Friday a month at the Sandzen [Gallery]. Every school classroom had original art artwork—mostly Sandzéns.”

2002 marked the end of Carl Peterson’s watercolor practice. He bought color pencils to experiment with and added ballpoint pens and magic markers to his supplies. He retired from the Sandzén Gallery board of directors in 2003, having served the Sandzen Gallery a total of 41 years, directing and supporting the mission. Carl’s sister passed away that same year, and by 2005 he was conducting an estate auction to distribute his art collection and clear out the Peterson home. In 2006 the artist moved into Lindsborg’s Bethany Home, taking just a few favorite pieces such as the landscape done for Gladys. Carl Peterson’s artistic legacy has remained strong in the community, with friends and family remembering how enjoyable he was to be around, living a fully artistic life and always “just trying to stay young at heart.”

The Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery

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The Sandzén Gallery gratefully acknowledges the generosity of lenders to the exhibition, along with those who donated materials related to Carl Peterson for the Gallery’s permanent collection and aided in developing the exhibition.

Cover image: *Wilson Lake*, 1969, watercolor on paper, collection of Gail and Steven Gustafson