

June 12 – August 7, 2022

A Lindsborg Treasure

wood carvings, stone sculpture
and oil paintings by

Anton Pearson (1892-1967)

Nils Anton Pearson began carving when he was a boy in Lund, Sweden, inspired by the expressive figural work of Axel Petersson (1868-1925), known as the “Döderhultarn” from his home province. Petersson was recognized as one of Sweden’s premier flat-plane woodcarvers by 1900, and went on to hold exhibitions in Stockholm in 1909, in several European capitals in 1911, and then in America touring his work 1911-15 from New York to San Francisco. By all accounts, Anton Pearson felt that with long experience, he could do better than his early idol, and did become one of the few, notable character wood carvers in the United States.



Anton Pearson in his studio at
505 S. Main Street in Lindsborg, Kansas

Pearson himself immigrated to America in 1912 at age 20, making the decision to avoid compulsory military service demanded of all 21-year-old males in Sweden in favor of seeking adventure in the new world. His first odd jobs were in farming, carpentry, and masonry, with a go at “wildcatting” oil fields in Texas looking for new pockets of the fossil fuel.

In 1915, Pearson visited the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco and continued travels eastward, eventually stopping in Lindsborg, Kansas. There, he met the influential artist Birger Sandzén (1871-1954), who caught his imagination and convinced the young man to stay on and enroll in the art program at Bethany College in 1916. Pearson settled in the town as an art student, but continued to work as an oil scout in central Kansas, arranging to lease acreages in McPherson, Russell, and other western counties for exploration.

The young man spent his evenings carving figures. His earliest carvings were in limestone which was easier to acquire in the central prairie lands of Kansas than good carving wood. In later years, friends often sent Pearson unusual woods for his art. A resident of South America substituted a new fence post for a neighbor's post of cocobolo and sent it to Lindsborg. Pearson also made collection trips searching for materials for his woodcarvings. In the fall of 1922, the young artist planned an extended, 3,000-mile wagon journey up through Iowa and Nebraska to Minnesota; down through Wisconsin, Missouri, and Arkansas; and finished by boating down the Mississippi. As reported in newspapers across the country, he brought home 175 paintings completed during his travels along with a variety of raw material

for his woodcarving. Over his career, Pearson used basswood, cedar, redwood, gum, and walnut to create expressive human characters along with bird and animal subjects.

Pearson's career as an art student was interrupted by World War I, being drafted in 1917 and sent to Camp Cody in New Mexico with an infantry battalion. He served a short time on the Mexican border before the war ended then returned to Lindsborg to re-enroll in art classes for the beginning of 1919. During summer of that year, Pearson and friend Leo Sellberg purchased a car and became WearEver cookware agents, traveling and demonstrating the kitchen products to women's clubs and other groups. The artist also worked for the Capper Publishing Company from the early 1920s as a traveling agent.

The young artist studied diligently with Sandzén, learning drawing and painting basics and showing in all of the Eastertide *Midwest Art Exhibition* annuals at the college, often serving on the planning committees with fellow advanced students Lydia Deere, Margaret Gustafson, Anna Keener, Carl Muller, and Katherine Smith. Pearson probably accompanied Sandzén to Colorado Springs the summer of 1923 where the professor taught a session of landscape painting for the Broadmoor Art Academy. Pearson's views of Cathedral Spires in Garden of the Gods park appear both in oil and wood in this exhibition, with the carving of the rock formation shown in Bethany College's annual spring exhibition in April 1924. Pearson remained close to the Sandzén family throughout his life, participating in many of the exhibitions Dr. Sandzén organized, including annual McPherson High School shows and some of the Swedish-American Artists exhibitions at the Swedish Club in Chicago over following decades.

During his first years in Lindsborg, Pearson met and courted piano student Grace Lane, writing letters to her during his extended travels. The two married in 1929 and built a home and studio on 505 S. Main Street. Grace developed a beautiful garden with a lily pond while Anton constructed stone walls and archways to compliment the outdoor spaces of their home. The Pearson studio became a well-known destination for art tours of Lindsborg, attracting day-tripper motorists and busloads of grade schoolers who enjoyed the wood carving demonstrations from the 1930s onward. For several weeks in 1940 Pearson displayed a large number of his carvings in Wichita elementary, middle, and high schools giving talks and demonstrations of technique. He maintained the belief that children were the hope of the future, and over the years welcomed thousands of school kids to his studio.

Pearson inspired members of his own family to take up the craft, working first with his daughter Rosemary's husband Norman Malm and then grandson Jim Malm. Pearson taught the art of flat-plane wood carving through his home studio, weekly gatherings at the Arts and Crafts Center downtown, and even at the Boeing aircraft plant on employee work breaks during World War II when he assisted in the pattern department. His unique style has inspired others to keep the tradition alive in Lindsborg, such as carver John Presley who exhibits his colorful figures around the region and enjoys demonstrating the craft at the town's annual Millfest every spring.



Birger Sandzén
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Gallery Hours: Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday, 1 to 5 p.m.