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Christian Petersen: From Denmark to the New Deal to Campus Sculptor

by Lea Rosson DeLong

Christian Petersen (1885-1961) was a Danish-American sculptor (Figure 1) whose accomplishment and importance in the history of American art is being increasingly understood and recognized.¹ The first goal in this presentation is to present a small portion of his work and to discuss why his reputation is growing and, at the same time, weave in aspects of his Danish background.



Figure 1. Christian Petersen at work on *The Gentle Doctor*, c.1936

In regard to his significance, three main accomplishments should be mentioned. Petersen has the distinction of being the first artist-in-residence in an American college. John Steuart Curry's appointment as artist-in-residence at the University of Wisconsin in 1936 is well known, but Petersen's appointment at Iowa State College (now University) came two years earlier in 1934. It should be noted that this appointment was made in one of the worst years of the Great Depression when the college's budget had been slashed by nearly a million dollars, or almost 30%, since 1930.² For the college to find room to add a sculptor to its staff leaves a certain impression of both the college and the sculptor.

Secondly, Iowa State University today has the largest collection of public art of any college in America, and Petersen helped to establish this collection and contributed to it more prolifically than any other artist. If you visit the campus today, you will find examples of his work throughout, both small relief plaques and portrait busts to large-scale outdoor works. A third point in understanding his significance is his art itself, which is one of the few examples we have of sculpture expressive of the Midwestern Regionalist philosophy of art. That philosophy or movement is best known through the work of Grant Wood and holds that artists should respond to their own environments and not go elsewhere for inspiration. It applied specifically to American artists who had been, for two centuries, inclined to seek inspiration from Europe. Regionalism, in part, comes out of the perception, common until after World War II, that America was culturally dependent on Europe. In the 1930s, many American artists, especially Wood and Petersen, encouraged Americans to examine their own indigenous cultures.

Petersen was born near Dybbøl, in the Schleswig area of Denmark, in 1885, on a 160-acre farm. Old photographs in the Christian Petersen Papers in the Archives of Iowa State University show a handsome farmhouse and inhabitants, all of which suggest a certain level of prosperity.³ A terrible battle between the Danes and the Prussians had been fought near the farm in 1864, within the memory of his parents. Thereafter, the area was ruled by the Prussians until 1920, and during that time, Danish men often were conscripted into

the Prussian military. The oppressive presence of Prussian rule and concern that their two sons would be drafted into their army were probably factors in the Petersens' decision to emigrate.

In the 1890s, the Petersen family emigrated from their Danish farm and came to the United States.⁴ At first they moved to a farm near Paxton, Illinois, but according to August Bang, who wrote about Petersen for the magazine, *Julegranen*, the family (especially the mother, Helene) disliked being so far from the sea. So they settled in New Jersey, where the artist received his earliest formal training in art, with study in New York at the Art Students League.

The family brought with them a strong Danish connection that continued through Petersen's life. There were many affects of his Danish roots, but the one that seems most important in terms of his art was his strong anti-war position. There is no reason to believe that he was a pacifist. But he did regard war with horror and he seems, especially during World War II when so many of his students were fighting, to have agonized over it. Several important sculptures relate to both World Wars, as will be mentioned later.

As expected, Petersen's first inclination toward art emerged while he was still a child in Denmark. He recalled that he had been fascinated by tools, especially the carving tools in his grandfather's workshop.

"This was in Denmark," he remembered, "after my grandfather retired from active work as a carpenter and pattern maker....I did not know what sculpture was but...I made boat after boat [from pieces of wood], then took them down to the seashore, which came right up to our farm....The love of carving has been with me ever since."⁵

Like his grandfather, Petersen began as a craftsman. He would have liked to go directly into sculpture, but he married early, began a family, and needed to earn a living. He was a die-cutter for several companies in New Jersey and Massachusetts, engraving small, intricately designed patterns into metal. He sandwiched in further training as he could and took on fine arts commissions whenever possible. Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, Petersen worked in the northeast, gradually building up a reputation for sculpture, most of which was in the academic, neo-classical, beaux-arts style that was

current in American sculpture of the time. His 1923 *Spanish-American War Memorial* for a park in Newport, Rhode Island is typical of his early style (Figure 2). He was always a realist, but the trend of his art was toward greater simplification. Despite his dislike of "ultra-modern" sculptors such as Brancusi or Gabo, it is clear that Petersen was affected by modernism.



Figure 2. *Spanish-American War Memorial*, Newport, Rhode Island, 1923

In 1928, when he was 43 years old, Petersen abandoned his industrial and commercial design jobs, divorced his wife, left the east coast and moved to Chicago to pursue a career of full-time sculpting. He could hardly have picked a worse time to embark on a fine arts career since the following year, 1929, found the country plunged into the Great Depression. Needless to say, sculpture commissions vanished. Petersen, like many artists of the time, was poverty-stricken, and like so many Americans of the time, he was desperate. Help came with the art programs of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.

In the early 1920s, Petersen had executed several small commissions, mainly for portraits, for citizens of Des Moines, gradually building up a number of contacts there. Friends in Des Moines notified Grant Wood, who had been appointed to head the first of the government's art programs, the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), of Petersen's situation. Wood hired him as a sculptor on the Project at \$25.00 per week. An overjoyed Petersen wrote to Wood after hearing the news:

Thanks heaps...You are right. I am broke—else I'd be there today—have to raise a loan for traveling expenses....Rarin' to go.⁶

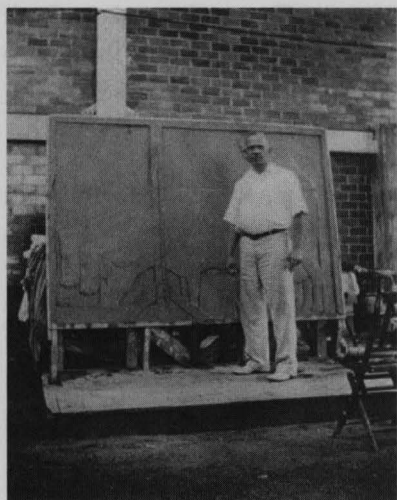


Figure 3. Petersen working on the Public Works of Art Project, Iowa City, Iowa. Behind him is a model for one panel of *The History of Dairying*, 1934

He was indeed “rarin’ to go,” and he embarked on a series of sculptures that would be the most important of his career.

The funding of the PWAP ran out in about six months, long before many of the paintings and sculptures begun could be finished. Under Wood’s direction, the painters employed by the PWAP produced several panels for the mural cycle *When Tillage Begins, Other Arts Follow*, Wood’s most extensive murals and the only ones still completely extant and in the place for which Wood designed them: the Iowa State University library.⁷ The other major accomplishment of the PWAP was the relief-sculpted

mural cycle for the Dairy Industry Building at Iowa State (Figures 3 and 4). As was the case for Wood’s paintings, the funding shortfall was largely picked up by the college. The president of Iowa State, Raymond M. Hughes, brought Petersen to the college, arranged with his faculty to finish and install Petersen’s sculpture cycle, and then added him to the staff as sculptor-in-residence. At that time, as for most of his career, Petersen was the lowest-paid member of the staff. But he had a studio, a creative working environment, and opportunities to

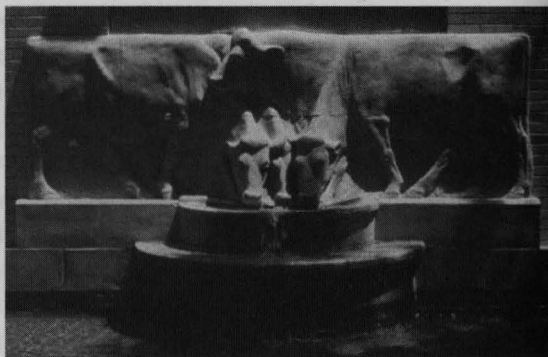


Figure 4. *The History of Dairying*, Iowa State University, 1934-35, detail of panel

take on commissions outside the college. Petersen seems to have been content at Iowa State and certainly formed a large circle of admiring friends, patrons, colleagues, and students. He was placed on the faculty of the Home Economics college in the department of Applied Arts. Because his classes were in that college, his students were exclusively women until 1939, when men were finally allowed to enroll in art classes.

It is clear that Petersen changed his style considerably while working with Grant Wood on the PWAP. To what extent this change of style was voluntary cannot be determined. Perhaps the sculptor was influenced by Wood's highly simplified, nearly abstract style of design. But the relief sculptures for the Dairy cycle show a clean, studied, deliberate line; an elimination of much detail; a shallow, flattened concept of space; and an overall simplification of form that is nearly geometric in places and approaches abstraction throughout. For these panels in particular, there is a stability and calmness that also suggests that Petersen, in forging this new style, may have recalled the restrained classicism of the Danish sculptor, Bertel Thorwaldsen (1770-1844), one of the major neoclassical sculptors of the late 18th/early 19th centuries.



Figure 5. *Veterinary Medicine*, Iowa State University, 1936-38. Original site

He continued this style in an equally distinctive and extensive relief for the Veterinary Medicine School of Iowa State (Figure 5). Both of these large sculptural reliefs were carried out in the 1930s and show Petersen employing the subject matter embraced by

Regionalism: scenes from life in the Midwest, interpreted in a straightforward, realist style. For the rest of his career, Petersen continued to create sculptures on the Iowa State College campus, to teach, and to carry out private commissions.

As suggested earlier, some of his most moving works were ones that dealt with the subject of war. He sketched and proposed a number of memorials related to World War II, but unfortunately none of them were ever realized. But the sketches he left show how deeply he felt about the catastrophe of the war that had overtaken the world. He did, however, create two sculptures during World War II, both of which convey his response to the conflict. *Men of Two Wars* (Figure 6) shows a World War II G.I. crouching beside a fallen World War I dough boy, as if to take up an unfinished cause. *The Price of Victory* (Figure 7) depicts the moment of death for a combat soldier. The sculpture was displayed in Iowa State's student union after the war, but it was so affecting to those who had experienced the war or lost loved ones that it was taken off display. In reaction to that decision, Petersen commented that "it was the greatest compliment ever paid to my work."⁸



Figures 6 and 7. *Men of Two Wars*, 1942 (left) and *The Price of Victory*, 1944

Petersen was a sculptor primarily, but his abilities as a designer were employed by the Danish-American magazine, *Julegranen*. For several years, Petersen provided the covers for the December issues, and his career was often followed in the pages of the magazine. It was clear that Petersen prized his Danish heritage. He continued his father's friendship with the Danish-born landscape designer Jens Jensen, and he produced a lively portrait bust of the man who, in addition to his work in the Chicago area, also planned aspects of the Iowa State campus. Petersen also enjoyed a long friendship with

August Bang, editor of *Julegranen* and a spokesman for the Danish-American community.

Among the many anecdotes from his hundreds of students over the years, a number mention his strong connection to his Danish background. One of the most revealing is recorded in Patricia Lounsbury Bliss's book, *Christian Petersen Remembered* of 1985, the first major publication on Petersen. Glen Jensen, a landscape architecture graduate of Iowa State, recalling his teacher's strong connection to Denmark, began by saying that Petersen could make each student feel special:

In my case, the emphasis was on the Danish connection.

This began on the first day of class when he looked over the roster and read aloud only three names—Feddersen, Jensen, and another obviously Danish name. Then he said, "Well, I see we have three 'A' students."

The professor told Jensen that he was from Dybbøl, the same town as the famous landscape architect, Jens Jensen. When the young man mentioned that it would be helpful if he were related to the successful Jensen, Petersen told him, "Don't you know, Glen, that all of us Danes are related?"⁹

Those Danish associations also extended to other faculty members who came from a Danish background, such as Martin Mortensen, the head of the Dairy Industry Department where Petersen had placed his first major sculpture at Iowa State, and Joanne Hansen, the head of the Applied Arts Department in which Petersen taught. These and other aspects of Christian Petersen's life suggest that the link to Denmark was never very far from him. The boy who had carved boats in his grandfather's workshop in Denmark developed into a significant sculptor, especially of Regionalist subjects, in America.

Certainly his legacy endures through his sculpture which distinguishes the Iowa State University campus. Through the efforts of Lynette Pohlman, the current Director of the University Museums, several works which Petersen had never been able to cast in bronze have now been cast and placed into important museums, including the Smithsonian American Art Museum. *Cornhusker*, one of the newly-cast sculptures, is an example of the Regionalist subject

matter with which Petersen worked for many years (Figure 8). The newest museum at Iowa State will be named for him and will feature his work as well as exhibitions on art, both contemporary and historical. Never a self-promoter, Petersen did not market his work, and for many years, it was little known outside of the Iowa State community. But the achievement of this Danish-American artist is being recognized increasingly, his reputation is expanding, and his place in American art is being affirmed.

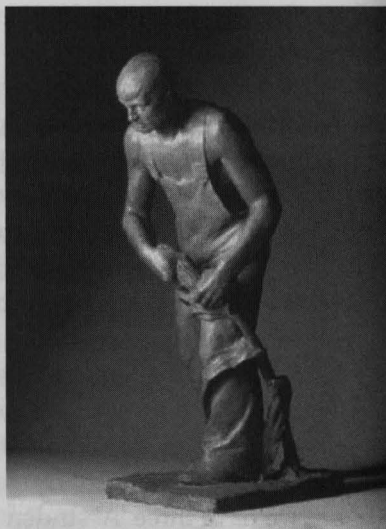


Figure 8. *Cornhusker*, 1941

Note: All photographs courtesy of University Museums, Iowa State University of Science and Technology. With the exception of Figure 2, all works are in the collection of the University Museums, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, Ames.

¹ The major repository for Petersen's work is the Brunnier Art Museum at Iowa State University in Ames. In 2000, the Brunnier published a biography of Petersen that included a catalogue raisonné. DeLong, Lea Rosson, *Christian Petersen, Sculptor*, with contributions by Patricia Lounsbury Bliss, Charles C. Eldredge, Dana L. Michels, Linda Merk-Gould and Lynette L. Pohlman. In 2006, the University Museums will open the Christian Petersen Museum in the renovated historic building, Morrill Hall, and will publish then an addendum to the catalogue raisonné.

² Hughes, Raymond, "Financial Readjustment in a Land Grant College," manuscript, c.1934. Hughes Papers, RS 2/8, University Archives, Iowa State University Library. The appropriation for Iowa State College in 1930-31 was \$3,482,460; for 1933-34 it was \$2,470,918. From 1932-33 to 1933-34 alone, the budget was reduced by just over \$704,000.

³ Much of the author's information and understanding of Petersen's Danish background came through John Robert Christianson of the History Department at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. Dr. Christianson's review

of *Christian Petersen, Sculptor* included information and photographs related to Petersen's family and their background, and it discussed more directly the conditions that may have encouraged the family's emigration from Denmark. *The Bridge*, vol.24, no.1, 2001, 75-99. The photographs are found in the Christian Petersen Papers, University Archives, Iowa State University Library.

⁴ The exact date of the emigration is unclear. Christianson (in his book review in *The Bridge*; see note 3), says it was 1898 (p.88) while Patricia Lounsbury Bliss, Petersen's first biographer, gives it as 1894, when Christian was nine years old: *Christian Petersen Remembered*, Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1986, 3.

⁵ Dwelle, Jessie Merrill, *Iowa, Beautiful Land: A History of Iowa*. Quoted in DeLong, *Christian Petersen, Sculptor*, 11.

⁶ Copy of letter from Petersen to Wood, Petersen Papers.

⁷ Wood's murals at the Iowa State University Library are the subject of an exhibition at the Brunner Art Museum (September 13 - November 27, 2006) and its accompanying publication, *When Tillage Begins, Other Arts Follow: The Dawn of a Campus Tradition*.

⁸ Quoted in Bliss, 114. *Men of Two Wars* is sometimes seen with the title *Carry On*, and *The Price of Victory* is sometimes entitled *Fallen Soldier*.

⁹ Bliss, 130-131.