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The Road Less Traveled 50th anniversary program was convened by Amy Hont, deputy director for programming. The exhibitions series was organized and curated by Arts Center Curator Karen Patterson. Special thanks to Emily Sotetsuwo, assistant curator, and Amy Cheloupek, guest curator.

Front Image Cutline: Ernest Hüpened, untitled (six-panel painted cabinet, detail), c. 1880–1900; wood, paint, metal; 62 3/4 x 87 3/4 x 15 1/2 in. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection, gift of Kohler Foundation Inc.

DRIFTLESS:
Nick Engelbert & Ernest Hüpden
+ David Rhodes
January 15–April 16, 2017

Austrian-born Nick Engelbert (1881–1962) purchased a half-acre farm in 1922 in Hollandale, Wisconsin; he named it “Grandview.” In the early 1930s, inspired by a visit to the Dickeyville Grotto, he covered a planter with stones and shells inlaid in concrete. Pleased with the results, he embellished the entire façade of his clapboard house in the same fashion. Over the years, he also enlivened his lawn with an array of sculptures. Engelbert took up painting in his later years, often portraying himself as a youthful traveler.

In 1889, Ernest Hüpden (c. 1858–1911), an itinerant artist and immigrant from Germany, arrived in Valton, Wisconsin. He offered his skills as a painter in exchange for food, drink, and lodging. From 1899 to 1901, Hüpden created his most well-known work, a mural in the Modern Woodmen of America lodge. Depicting the fraternal order’s initiation ceremony, the panorama was posthumously titled “The Painted Forest.”

DRIFTLESS is one of fifteen exhibitions on view throughout 2017 as part of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center’s 50th-anniversary series, THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED. Twenty thought leaders were invited to lend their expertise and provide new insight into the Arts Center’s collection of works created by an-environment builders.
David Rhodes is an acclaimed author of five books, including the novel *Driftless* (Milkweed Editions, 2008), a fictional tale set in the Driftless region. Rhodes knows the area intimately as a former resident of Valton, WI, where Ernest Hüpeden’s immersive mural, *The Painted Forest*, is located. In Rhodes’s response to the exhibition, he writes about the people who embraced Hüpeden and kept the legacy of the itinerant painter alive. By doing so, he also provides a window into the Driftless communities who gave space for a farmer, Nick Engelbert, to live an artistic life, envisioning his land surrounded by concrete sculptures and an embellished home.

Here, Rhodes discusses his role in the exhibition and what drew him to the work of Nick Engelbert and Ernest Hüpeden.

How were you introduced to Nick Engelbert’s and Ernest Hüpeden’s work?

For nearly forty years, I lived two miles away from Valton, Wisconsin, where *The Painted Forest* currently stands. Because of music programs and other public events held inside the building, Ernest Hüpeden’s mural was very well known. After the Kohler Foundation became involved with the restoration project, the renewed interest in Hüpeden brought to light other local examples of his work, and I was fortunate to see some of them.

My familiarity with Nick Engelbert’s work began by hearing favorable mentions of Grandview by people who had visited the sculpture park outside of Hollandale, Wisconsin, and later through art catalogues.

The wildly adventurous panoramic mural found inside the Woodmen’s hall and the playful enthusiasm of the concrete figures of Grandview incite the viewer to wonder about the unique imaginations of their creators, and to further wonder about the equally unique places and social circumstances that made room for, and perhaps even nurtured, those productions.

To accompany the exhibition, I wanted to write a brief description of the rural area and people around Valton, Wisconsin, and after moving there in 1972. I proposed to highlight this place with anecdotal references to several of the Driftless Area’s more colorful individuals, descriptions of local public functions, mention of the region’s economic structure, and depictions of a backward looking, once vibrant social order that allowed an astonishing variety of fairly eccentric personalities to flourish within tightly woven communities. This almost fond tolerance for idiosyncratic behavior can be partly explained by the needs of somewhat insular communities to provide their own entertainment; and the same spirit of communal give-and-take that encouraged neighborhood joke-tellers, yarn-spinners, musicians, cake makers, singers, quilt makers, parade float makers, revivalists, furniture makers, flower gardeners, square dance callers, taxidermists, and dressmakers also encouraged itinerant painters and dairymen turned to sculpture-builders.

How does your own background inform your response to Hüpeden’s and Engelbert’s work?

There were artists in my immediate and extended family, and in growing up I was often aware of artistic expressions adorning and commenting upon day-to-day living. I learned to value originality and creativity from an early age, with a bias toward the “rural” and “pastoral” themes.

Has working on your response to this exhibition changed or expanded your notions about what you do?

More than anything, this exhibition has prompted a reflection upon the similarities of paintings and memories; both, it seems, serve to record instants of personally experienced events within an evolving social structure, and when these scenes are revisited they invoke feelings, attitudes, and thoughts that over the years we may have grown away from and perhaps even changed our attitude toward.

Though much of our once thriving rural culture has changed irrevocably, the instinctual glimmers of small community sensibilities still live within our inherited psyches, and the creative artifacts that have been preserved out of those times and places still resonate with us. The emotional glue that connects children to parents, families to other families, and individuals to communities bubble up through the works of Hüpeden and Engelbert, and their works provide a needed perspective to reflect upon the qualities of those social bonds.