In 1915, artists of Kansas organized an exhibition of John Steuart Curry to paint a series of murals depicting history for the state capitol building. The largest commission in the country was to be paints for the most important art project of the day, a college town. Brainstorming the best idea for the mural, Curry worked on a preliminary sketch in New York. By the time of the commission, Curry had already established himself as a major painter, but was still young enough to be interested in new ideas and techniques. He was known for his narrative paintings of Midwest farm life in a style now known as American Regionalism.

The Kansas Mural Controversy

In the 1930s, Regionalism was a dominant artistic style in the United States. Artists such as Grant Wood, Charles Burchfield, and John Steuart Curry were known for their depictions of rural life, which were often idealized representations of agricultural America. However, many Kansans were critical of the way Curry portrayed their state, and the resulting controversy over the murals created a national sensation.

John Steuart Curry

John Steuart Curry was born on November 14, 1897. He was the son of a farmer and grew up in a rural setting. He attended the Kansas City Art Institute and later moved to New York City to study with the renowned illustrator and artist Harvey Pekar. In 1920, Curry moved to Paris to study with the impressionist painters. He returned to Kansas in 1921 and enrolled at the Kansas State College, where he studied under the famous artist, Arthur Wesley Dow.

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Discussion Questions

What do you think is the purpose of the painting of Manhattan?

How would you describe the art movement American Regionalism?

Why were Kansans not pleased with Curry's Kansas Statehouse Murals?

How do you feel about them?

If you were given an idea to paint murals for your capital building, what topics would you choose? Are they controversial or neutral? Why did you choose them?

American Regionalism: Art and Experience

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Curry's Art and the Circus

John Steuart Curry's relationship with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus was a significant influence on his art. Curry's paintings of the circus performers, like dispossessed farmers, were a reflection of the social and political struggles of the time. Curry's depictions of the circus performers, such as those in his painting "Manhunt," were a critique of the capitalist system and the exploitation of workers.

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JOHN STEUARD CURRY
AMERICAN, 1897-1946

MANHUNT
1931, OIL ON CANVAS

JOSLYN ART MUSEUM® OMAHA, NEBRASKA
Museum Purchase (1979.142)