FORWARD

Not long after I started working at Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum at Canyon, Texas, as their curator of art, I was asked to accompany a patron to Cal Farley's Boys Ranch, northwest of Amarillo. The then-director of the ranch asked the patron, a known art collector, to come see a rather large painting of cowboys hanging in the administrative offices there. When we arrived at the ranch and entered the office, I was taken aback by the large size (probably 30 x 40 in.) and high quality of this "cowboy painting" depicting a lone cowboy trailing a small herd of multi-colored cowponies down the wall of an arroyo. The artist's color harmony was excellent in the scene and his drawing of the human and horse anatomy was solid. I remember in particular the way the artist had captured the small powdery dust cloud that a horse's hoof will flick up as it walks on a dry trail. It was a helluva picture. I noted that artist's name down ("F. Darge") and never forgot the painting.

This was probably in 1989 after I had met in Abilene, the then "giants" of early Texas art collecting, A. C. Cook of Fort Worth and Bill Cheek of Dallas. I wrote a letter on my electric typewriter (this was before email and text) and sent it to Bill asking if he had heard of Darge. In his always gentle and gentlemanly way he telephoned me to tell me that he had a file on Darge and that the artist had had a one-man show at Palo Duro Canyon in 1950. I was a little embarrassed that I had not known of that exhibition as Palo Duro was then, literally, my front yard since I lived on its rim at that time. Bill then sent me a photocopy of a biographical sheet (possibly written by Darge himself) he had obtained somewhere and I noticed that Darge was born in Germany the same year as H. D. Bugbee, an artist I came to know somewhat intimately during my time at Panhandle-Plains and after. Later, I learned of Darge's many paintings of northern New Mexico and Big Bend. Lastly, I learned he was best known for his depictions of cowboys. I had hit the jackpot on this little-known Texas artist as he was associated with several things near and dear to me: Palo Duro, Germany, Bugbee, Taos, Big Bend, West Texas, and, especially, cowboys!

(Sadly, I learned a few years later that one of the more-troubled students at Boys Ranch, in a fit of rage, broke into the administration office and shredded the Darge painting with a knife. Instead of bringing the painting to the Texas Conservation Center at Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum for examination and possible rescue, the ranch's staff threw the painting away along with its hand-carved frame, believing it was beyond repair.)

Later in 1989 while examining a group of paintings in an estate at an Amarillo bank, I ran across Darge's work again, this time his fine small oil (8" x 10") *"Approaching Storm" Bandy Ranch.* Fortunately, after asking the executor of the estate about the disposition of this painting, Panhandle-Plains as bequeathed its first Darge painting. Later, the Museum's Friends

of Southwestern Art purchased Darge's small, choice nocturne, *Moonlight* and *Palo Duro Canyon.*

Over my three decades at Panhandle-Plains and in the many early Texas art exhibitions I curated, I included a number of Darge works of art. For example, for the 2003 exhibition "Neighbors: Texas Artists in New Mexico," we borrowed his oils *Along U S. 84; Arroyo Seco; Summer Harvest (Taos Pueblo, N.M.)* and *Sunday Morning, Trampas Church*; all fine examples of his work. Honoring the 100th anniversary of the proposal to make Palo Duro Canyon a National Park in 2006 (it failed to make the cut), we included Darge's work. In 2007, for "Urban Texas: Changing Images of An Evolving State," his Untitled [Oil Town] appeared, followed by 2010's "Lone Star Still Lifes" where Darge's *The Glass Jar* and the same carved figures of a horse and a bear that he depicted in the painting stole the show.

Through my work in early Texas and New Mexico art and cowboy and ranching history I have privileged to drive over much of the great Southwest, in the words of Mr. Reaugh (who Mr. Darge so admired) "as God has made it." Much of the West Texas Reaugh and Darge captured—albeit using their own distinctive voices—I have seen: from Dalhart to the Davis Mountains, from Benbrook to Big Bend, from Fort Worth to Fort Bliss. Likewise, since 1985 while a grad student at Southern Methodist University, I have been making mostly-annual pilgrimages to Taos and northern New Mexico. I know of what Fred Darge speaks in his art.

Finally, I have consulted with commercial galleries and auction houses in both New Mexico and Texas on a number of Darge paintings. There are many high points in those jobs of work, but some stand out, particularly his *The Stampede.*

Suffice it to say, Mr. Darge's work is of great interest to me.

As I have written and presented elsewhere, when Darge arrived in Texas in late 1933 Texas had become "progressive" and had allegedly moved on from its cattle and cowboy past to become "cultured." Any artist who focused on these anachronistic subjects could be effectively marginalized and juried out of major exhibitions. By about 1942, Jerry Bywaters--the unofficial spokesperson for Lone Star Regionalism--mapped out his own "Tree of Texas Art (Tree of Texas Painting)." In two of the known versions of this tree, "leaves" of the branch labeled "Historical & Pioneer Subjects, Cattle Painters" or "Western Historical Cattle Painters Pioneer Subjects" are designated for Reaugh, Darge, Bugbee, Tom Lea, and Ben Carlton Mead; Big Spring former cowboy turned painter Harvey Wallace Caylor (1867-1932); and Honey Grove photographer Erwin E. Smith (1886-1947). Bywaters sketched in another "leaf" on this branch for Wichita Falls artist, John Marcellus "Tex" Moore (1865-1948), but noted it with "or Primitive?"[i] Another version of Bywaters's "Tree" has Caylor and Reaugh as the "branch" with Bugbee, Lea, Mead, and Smith as "leaves." Although not officially on the jury for the Texas section at the Texas Centennial Central

Exposition in Dallas in 1936, Bywaters certainly influenced the selection of artists. No cowboys or Texas longhorns could be found in the exhibition, although Darge showed his *Open Air Gospel*.

Although a frequent exhibitor in the Dallas Allied Arts exhibitions, Darge was never part of the exclusive club that was the Dallas Regionalists, as readers will learn in the following pages. This hegemony has even tainted more recent examinations of early Texas art and his work has not been included with the other Texas Regionalists. However, both stylistically, thematically, and philosophically Fred Darge was clearly a Regionalist, and he did not learn those lessons in Texas. He learned them in Chicago.

Darge saw the value in preserving the West, Old and New, through art. This view paralleled those of Iowa's Grant Wood, Missouri's Thomas Hart Benton, and Kansas's John Steuart Curry. Part of Wood's Regionalist philosophy involved saving "bits of American folklore that are too good to lost."[ii] Furthermore, I would argue, Wood, Benton, Curry, and Darge hoped to "instill new magic and charm into old fables," such as those found in the rural Middle West and the Southwest, "so they would not, in the wake of iconoclasts be lost forever."

Wood felt that he and his fellow artists in the Middle West in the late 1920s and early 1930s were creating a "new, truly American school of painting" by concentrating on American themes more familiar to wider audiences. Generally, these works presented well-known subjects in more narrative, literal terms; terms anathema to modernists. Wood composed his canvases emphasizing design and decorative qualities in an attempt to elude the disparaging connotation "illustration" and to avoid creating what he called "merely tinted photographs."[iii] The same is true for Darge.

Thus the Midwest Regionalists' attempts at avoiding negative judgements for their paintings were part of larger movement in the United States from 1925 to 1945 wherein artists relied on abstract formal devices in order to be "modern."[iv] Wood, for example, eventually coalesced in "a style of artificial geometries, clean surfaces, and relentless patterns . . . like the Art Deco decorators of his day."[v] However, no matter how abstract the formal devices they applied, Regionalist felt that in order to impart a message paintings had to be figurative, they had to tell a story. Furthermore, in spite of the fantasy-like guises in some of their paintings assumed, such as Wood's *Stone City*, these canvases were always created using hard visual data including employing models, on-site sketches, and photographs. Enter Fred Darge following this methodology.

America's awareness of Grant Wood began with the exhibition of his most famous painting, *American Gothic*, at the annual exhibition of American paintings and sculpture at the Art Institute of Chicago in October 1930. Also included in this exhibition were paintings by Taos artists Ernest Blumenschein, Walter Ufer, W. Herbert Dunton, Santa Fe painter Theodore Van Soelen,

California's Millard Sheets, and Curry and Benton. It was a watershed moment for American Regionalism, and as a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Darge could not have missed this exhibition. Chicago also played a key role in being a kind of bully pulpit for art making in the American West, largely due to its agricultural interests, particularly wheat and beef cattle. Chicago-based writer Hamlin Garland's essays in the early 1890s were critical to the reception of American Impressionists working in the American West, for example. Equally important for Chicago as the gateway to art of the American West, Garland was the mouthpiece for the Society of Western Artists founded there in 1896. Despite its name, the Society of Western Artists had only four truly "Western" artists in its roster, Frank Reaugh of Texas, Charles Partridge Adams of Colorado, and Bert Phillips and Joseph Henry Sharp of the Taos art colony.[vi] Based in Chicago, the Society exhibited in Midwestern cities Cleveland, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Chicago, St. Louis, and Detroit from 1896 to 1914.

Chicago also served as the conduit for a number of artists who became associated with the New Mexico colonies. Chicago-based Walter Ufer and Victor Higgins visited Taos first in 1914 and E. Martin Hennings in 1917, before they became permanent residents there. Because of the large German and eastern and northern European communities in Chicago, artists from these groups migrated to Santa Fe, including B. J. O. Nordfeldt and Gustave Baumann. William Penhallow Henderson and Albert H. Schmidt, among others, also relocated from Chicago to Santa Fe.

Finally, at Chicago's Century of Progress International Exposition (World's Fair), "Contemporary American Painting," held in 1933 and early 34, Benton, Curry, Wood, Blumenschein, Ufer--Regionalists all by this time—exhibited there. Surely Darge left Chicago with affirmation for what his future direction would take.

Regionalism also included a subset of "conscious primitivism" to which Darge also had connections, in my view. Doris Lee (1905-1983) and Agnes Tait (1894-1981) are two examples of this stylistic avenue. Both were well-trained in the academic tradition in Paris and New York, yet both chose a distinctive style that smacked of primitivism for their mature work which included murals and easel paintings for the New Deal art programs. Both felt this path made their depictions of everyday life in America more understandable to everyone without the artifice of so-called "high art. Their work is indebted to the "primitive" painters of the 17th century, especially in Belgium, The Netherlands, and Germany and was well published in the 1930s. Moreover, Tait made her home in Santa Fe after 1941.

Much like the work of Lee and Tait, Fred Darge's paintings often include sections that challenge Albertian perspective and the rules of anatomy. Given that he could paint well using these academic strictures, I believe his naivete was studied, practiced, and conscious.

I have known Bob McKee since 1989 after we connected while I was researching a Buck Dunton painting in his grandfather's art collection. I have gotten to know Bonnie over those years as well. I had the honor of seeing part of their collection hanging in Dallas and hanging their outstanding William Penhallow Henderson painting, *Santa Fe Plaza*, at Panhandle-Plains where they lent it long term. I vaguely knew of his interest in Fred Darge, but wasn't aware of his Darge obsession until recent years. From my own studies of early Texas and New Mexico art, history, and culture, I know obsession can be a powerful lever.

An in-depth study of Fred Darge's life and his contributions to early Texas art as well as American art, is long, long overdue. With what Robert and Bonnie McKee have assembled here, we gain a far greater understanding of the depth and breadth of Darge's life and work, and particularly of the region in which he worked. Saddle up for an interesting read!

Michael R. Grauer

April 7, 2020

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[i]Both these drawings are part of the Jerry Bywaters Collection, Hamon Arts Library, Southern Methodist University. Moore had had himself declared the "official cowboy artist of Texas" by the Texas Legislature in 1935.

[ii] Wanda Corn, *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983): 86.

[iii]Ibid., 42.

[iv]James M. Dennis, *Grant Wood: A Study in Americana and Culture, (New York: Viking Press,* 1975): 99.

[v] Corn, 73.

[v] The closest "regional" city to these three artists was St. Louis, so they were listed under St. Louis artists.

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