Ernest Hüpeden

Beyond the Forest

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Edgewood College Gallery

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The Stream
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Edgewood College Gallery and the Art Department of Edgewood College are delighted to share Ernest Hüpeden: Beyond the Forest as the first exhibition in the new Visual and Theatre Arts Center, now named The Stream. We’re proud of the College’s impressive collection of a type of art often called Outsider, Naïve, Vernacular, Frilli, or Untrained. The awe-inspiring Painted Forest art environment in Valton, Wisconsin is one example among many within our collection of why it’s not always important where an artist is trained or with whom she or he studied.

Ernest Hüpeden’s magnum opus, the Painted Forest transcends simple labels. Encounters with the Painted Forest, which is an entire building filled with murals illustrating secret fraternal rituals and imagining a Valton of the future, offer us a chance to unleash our imaginations by envisioning a turn of the century village and its townsfolk heady with hopes and dreams not unlike ours today. For many Wisconsinites, the ideas and values communicated by the murals are familiar to us through the shared memories of our parents and grandparents.

The objects in this exhibition help us to understand the Painted Forest in the context of Hüpeden’s work in other villages in the Valton area as well as larger cities like La Crosse. The paintings that have survived document homesteads and the land they were built upon. Today, many of the views the artist painted remain. Others have vanished with time.


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—Paul Baker Prindle
Director, Edgewood College Gallery
August 2012
Little is known about the artist Ernest Hüpeden’s life in Germany, or his time in the United States, from 1878—when he arrived in New York from Hamburg aboard the steamship Herder—and 1898, when he wandered into Valton, Wisconsin. Stories passed down over the years are now apocryphal. The few that are recorded in news articles, unpublished manuscripts, and letters, which vary in their details, describe a well-educated married man with a son, who worked as a banker in Germany. By one account, his wealthy wife served cocktails, leading to his habitual drinking. Falsely accused of embezzlement, he spent seven (or eight) years in prison, where he taught himself to paint. Hüpeden was exonerated and set free upon the deathbed confession of the true embezzler. Broken and alone, he shipped off to America. The name “Ernest Hüpeden” appears on the passenger manifest of the Herder, with the occupation “Kaufmann,” or merchant. His birth is listed as circa 1858.

If this is approximately correct, he was around twenty or maybe twenty-five years old when he embarked, calling into question a prior banking career and seven-year prison sentence. Hüpeden’s claim that he was imprisoned may have been a cover for evading the “sentence” of German conscription, as he was strongly opposed to the rising militarism in Germany. In a 1957 letter to a local newspaper, Judson Erwin of La Farge, Wisconsin recalled memories of Hüpeden, who had stayed with his family in April 1914:

His father educated him in Germany, and he also attended two or three different colleges, he told us. He was married and had one son—he left them and came to America. He left because of some trouble with his wife and father, and he hated the German military machine. He voted Republican as near as I know, but in belief and at heart he was a strong Socialist. He said it would come in “Gods own time,” but sooner or later we would have to fight Germany, and he wished he could help to crush the German military power. He also told us how our educational system in the U.S.A. was drifting away from us all the time as well as our other freedoms, and that sooner or later the wealth of the nation would all be in the hands of a few (and he was quite right). He said, “Germany has far better schools and colleges than America but they teach militarism in all of them and in time will try to rule the world.” He hated to see this take place, for it would mean that the Civil War under Lincoln was nothing but a ‘sham battle.’

Regardless of inconsistencies about facts of his life in Germany, Hüpeden shared what he wished with the people of western Wisconsin, so we will stick with the story, his story.

Nothing is currently known about his next twenty years, in which he made his way from the eastern seaboard to Wisconsin, walking and painting, as he claimed, in exchange for room and board. In 1982, I spent several months in Valton, Wisconsin during the restoration of Hüpeden’s masterpiece, The Painted Forest, searching for information from local residents about the artist. More than a few locals suggested that I consult a medium at “Spook Hill,” the local term for the Spiritualist Camp in nearby Wonewoc. Spiritualists had been in the region since 1874 and the Camp began operation in 1893. Since it had deep roots in the area, I decided to visit. I selected a spiritualist named Mr. Mason, who told me to write a question on a piece of paper and hold it in my hand. I wrote out “Ernest Hüpeden Painted Forest” and clutched it tightly, wavering between skepticism and curiosity. After meditating for a time, Mr. Mason described his impressions: “I see shoes, piles and piles of shoes with holes in the soles. I see a man walking, walking, walking.”

1 Judson Erwin, letter to Wisconsin REA News, Vol. 18––No. 4, October 1957, page unknown.

Lisa Stone

Ernest Hüpeden’s painting, known as The Painted Forest. West elevation detail, untamed conifer forest. Photo: Paul Baker Prindle
Somewhere on Earth

Panoramic Barn Yard View

Because he was a German artist who chose to represent American life. Ernest Hüpeden’s travels from New York to Wisconsin, perhaps expanding the trail of his German cyclorama painters in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Some background on the painted panorama is necessary here. The struggle to conjoin ideas and representation and convert them into a new visual language has been a primary concern of visual artists throughout the history of art. The painted panorama occupies a transitional period in this history. Out of the perennial attempt to stretch borders and expand upon established formats to communicate the experience of space, depth, and illusion ever more effectively, and to represent a particular reality by more convincing visual means, the phenomenon of the painted panorama was born. One could argue that the urge to communicate visually in a panorama format originated in the ancient cave paintings of Africa and Western Europe. A far more recent appearance of this phenomenon emerged in England in the 1820's, predating the invention of cinema by about a century, but later he became convinced, upon seeing a panoramic rendition of London From Upper Midwest in the 1870's, when German painters were interested in painting panoramas and cycles of "little Munich," with a large German-speaking population and a cultural and economic exchange. John Vanderlyn's monumental visual narratives had a curious mobility given their immense size and the space and equipment necessary to present them, and many American-made panoramas toured around the country and overseas.

The craze for panoramas and cycloramas of this period were eventually deemed obsolete with the introduction of cinema and other factors. The Painted Panorama: Henry Lewis Great National Work (Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 1969). For a group of German cycloramas, see Caballero, "Great Father of Waters." 5

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The Painted Forest, Valton, Wisconsin. A 42 foot tall by 358 feet long, 86 by the Milwaukee atelier, is preserved at the Atlanta Cyclorama and Civil War Museum in Grant Park in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1985, some of the figures and objects were created to surround the entire circumference of the painting, extending the illusion into three-dimensional space. It has been deemed the largest oil painting and the longest-running show in the world.8

Ernest Hüpeden is credited with creating an outstanding, original, and fortunately extant painted panorama was created in a simple vernacular building in the town of Valton, in the dramatic "Hidden Valley" region of western Wisconsin. Built in 1898 as M.W.A. Camp # 6190, a fraternal lodge hall, the simple frame exterior belies the complex life insurance for its members. From the clouds in the treetops on the vaulted ceiling, to the wildflowers in the wainscoting, the entire interior of the lodge hall is painted in a symbolic "all around" landscape. Known as Wood Hall to the locals, The Painted Forest was not made up and repurposed for theatre backdrops. The artist was hired to represent universal principles. Rather than giving his patrons a grand pastiche of the actual surrounding landscape and local history and culture with remark-able fidelity. The cardinal points of the compass have strong symbolic significance in many fraternal rituals, and lodge halls are appointed accordingly. In The Painted Forest, each scene reveals its actual and symbolic direction, and several allude to a point in time—past, present, or future—as well. Hüpeden must have been aware of the essential functions of layout and adornment of fraternal ritual spaces. It is possible that he had been initiated into the Free Masonic craft in Germany, or that he saw (or even painted) other fraternal lodge halls along his travels. While he has come to be known as a self-taught or folk painter, and his other known paintings fall neatly into these genres, with The Painted Forest other fraternal lodge halls and their performers and the audience were one and the same.9

The Painted Forest is a complex composition presenting a sequential narrative unfolding in a metaphorical landscape that reflects the actual surrounding landscape and local history and culture with remark-able fidelity. The cardinal points of the compass have strong symbolic significance in many fraternal rituals, and lodge halls are appointed accordingly. In The Painted Forest, each scene reveals its actual and symbolic direction, and several allude to a point in time—past, present, or future—as well. Hüpeden must have been aware of the essential functions of layout and adornment of fraternal ritual spaces. It is possible that he had been initiated into the Free Masonic craft in Germany, or that he saw (or even painted) other fraternal lodge halls along his travels. While he has come to be known as a self-taught or folk painter, and his other known paintings fall neatly into these genres, with The Painted Forest

8 Photo: Mike McGinnis, 1982.
10 Ibid. p. 6. Rhoads wrote "…differing sources estimate that it took between six months and two years to complete. He did not paint consec-tuously, would disappear from time to time."
Ernest Hüpeden’s painting, known as The Painted Forest (west elevation, south corner: tree with owl in branches and a skull and crossbones on the forest floor). Photo: Lisa Stone, 2011.

The narrative begins in the southwest corner with a candidate for initiation riding a wide-eyed goat, heading west toward symbols of wisdom and death. It is one of Hüpeden’s most powerful images and may well contain powerful images and may well contain

counts conveyed (or fueled) condescending remarks about_jobless people who were without the means to acquire a life centered at home and to accompany a life centered at home and to the moral values presumed to

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backdrop of its creation. The narrative begins in the southwest corner with a candidate for initiation riding a wide-eyed goat, heading west toward symbols of wisdom and death. It is one of Hüpeden’s most powerful images and may well contain powerful images and may well contain...
the candidate for initiation is dragged in to the scene from stage left by masked men in unidentified ritual costumes, and forced to witness a tumultuous event. Within a clearing between hills that appear to collapse into the center, black-masked and costumed men burn a Modern Woodman of America member—still very much alive—in a roaring bonfire. His M.W.A. cap lies on the ground in front of the fire. Off to the right, a man in street clothes has just been stabbed to death by one of the masked and costumed men.

The masked and costumed men may represent a rival fraternity, such as the Improved Order of Red Men. This grizzly scene corresponds to the place in the lodge where the mortality ritual—an enactment of a symbolic death in order to attain wisdom regarding life’s mysteries—took place. Hüpeden satisfied his patrons with an imaginatively original image, warning of the need to be conjoined in fraternity, the better to survive the perils lurking in both nature and society.

In the last vignette on the west wall the candidate, still visibly shaken, is lead by his M.W.A. Escort to a darkened forest clearing under a blazing sunset. Skeletons are strewn in the woods. Death, the “inevitable initiator,” is ever-present, but they approach the safety of a campfire with tripod and black cauldron, around which eight Modern Woodmen gather. The gray-robed Forest Patriarch—figure of wisdom and authority in M.W.A. rituals—officiates in a scene conveying the promise of safety in the bonds of fraternity. Thus concludes the dramatic west wall.

The lecture goes on to describe the tempests and adversity in the forest of life, and the M.W.A. as a forest of brotherly love. In the central panel on the west wall in stature, diverse in design, and varied in color are the dwellers in the woodland, yet dependent are they on the same Mother Earth for life. And how wonderful it is that from this common soil each selects those elements which suit its development: that the oak and the violet draw sustenance form the same source; that the birch finds the material for its paper-like bark in the same ground that gives the rough coat to the slim. Thus we behold the fraternity of nature. 44


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The north wall is painted as a lofty expanse of forest, with a billowing fire in the center and an imposing castle on a distant mountain. The candidate (who has possibly achieved initiate status by now) is guided by the Forest Patriarch and accompanied by four axe-wielding Modern Woodmen members. The patriarch points to the castle, an M.W.A. outpost with pennants flying from the turrets, one with the M.W.A. motto Peace Light and Safety, the other, M.W. of A. Valton Camp #6190. The mural mirrors the ritual here as well. The Forest Patriarch was stationed here, and an actual stove was positioned in front of the painted fire. The mural symbolizes the fundamental tenet of solidarity in fraternity after surviving the initiation ritual, while also alluding to the northern compass point, and perhaps the homeland Hüpeden left behind.

The eastern wall brings daylight, the present, and the future. Departing from the emotional and philosophical imagery on the west and north walls, the first scene on the north end of the east wall features several industrious M.W.A. members splitting logs in a domesticated forest setting, reflecting the M.W.A. rhetoric, “…to clear the forests and let civilization, commerce, and the arts occupy the ground.”

A mother with her infant stands in the doorway of a log cabin, apparently experiencing the security that accompanies diligent labor and an ordered, insured life. Hüpeden borrowed the image from a stock M.W.A. engraving. He added a young boy in the foreground, said to be Royal Forest, the son of a Camp #6190 charter member, whose name was also the password to the lodge.

The center scene on the eastern wall portrays a leap from daily life into the future, Hüpeden’s vision of Valton one hundred years later, 1999. The diligent labor and ambition depicted in the previous vignette evolves into a cityscape cleared of every single tree. Hüpeden created a rendition of an urban future, in which commerce has flourished and buildings recede down the street into the vanishing point. There’s little human activity in the scene: two men talking on a corner in the foreground, a delivery cart with driver and...
two prancing horses (similar to the signature teams in several of Hüpeden’s “home place” paintings) and the barkeep and two patrons at the town’s saloon. The scene has the feeling of a surreal, unpopulated future, similar to the Metaphysical Town Square paintings of Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978), notable for their lonely streetscapes receding into infinity.

In Hüpeden’s city of the future the M.W.A. Bank of Valton looms in the foreground. It was here that, in the M.W.A. ritual, the Candidate and his Escort approach a banker for aid. The script reads,

17 Escort: Stranger, we now find ourselves upon the streets of a great city in the busy world. We have heard the noise and tumult of commercial strife in which everybody is seeking wealth, influence, and fame. Nobody appears to have any time to devote to works of charity. We, in our poverty, have been unnoticed, for they can see no chance for gain in such beggars as we appear to be. But over yonder is a great banking house, where many people of wealth enter to deposit their gold; let us enter and approach the opulent Banker and rehearse a story of suffering and want, and see what reply we will receive.17

They are predictably denied aid. Hüpeden, however, projects the solvency and success of the M.W.A. Bank of Valton in the future, in a cut-away view of the bank’s interior, revealing a widow in mourning dress (still in the fashion of 1899) cashing in her M.W.A. insurance policy for $2,000—quite a sum to imagine at the turn of the last century. A death has occurred, but no Modern Woodmen of America members surround the widow in her time of need, as was promised in M.W.A. insurance literature. While flattering his patrons with an imagined, grand city, Hüpeden predicted the evaporation of fraternity (the M.W.A. eventually abandoned their fraternal trappings, evolving into the commercial insurance policy).

Behind the teller’s wickets, Hüpeden painted an amorphously formed map of the United States on the left, a clock in the center—its pendulum swinging far to the right, suggesting real time (2:34)—and a list of the Rates of Exchange for New York, Chicago, San Francisco, St. Louis, London, Liverpool, Hamburg, Berlin, Paris, and Vienna. The scene brings to mind several signature works by 17th century Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675). In interior rooms of the gentry class, awash in meditative isolation, sublime personal gestures occur: a woman plays a lute, gazing, pensively out a window; a woman holds an over, her other hand held hesitantly at a window—a woman engages in conversation with a man; a window—all the windows are on the left—is open to the world beyond, remote from this intensely interior setting.18

All three paintings have maps or details of maps on the walls directly behind the narrative action, maps of the then-known world, references to the complex geopolitical backdrops whose ramifications affect each individual, each interior scene, knowingly or not. Hüpeden projected Valton in 1999, with subtle references to the global political and economic context that Valton would eventually inhabit. His iconography on the entire east wall implies that commerce and growth do not occur without implications to the social, political, and natural landscape. The imagined future is grand but lonely. When Hüpeden arrived in Valton, it was “…a thriving community with two-story framed schoolhouses, three blacksmith shops, several warehouses, three doctors, a lawyer, three grocery stores, two department stores, two barrel stave
shops, two churches, a post office, hotel, two mills, furniture store, creamery, wool packing house, shoe-makers, hat shop, sorghum manufactory, and lime burning kilns.”

Valton dwindled considerably due to several factors, mainly because the railroad bypassed the village and thus deprived it of its primary ability to grow beyond a horse-drawn town. Hüpeden did not imagine the entry of the automobile, and in his vision of the city in 1999, Valton remained depicted in the horse-powered era. Valton in 2012 is an unincorporated village with two churches, the lodge hall and Painted Forest Studio, and a few blocks of houses set among farms in the rolling hills and valleys of western Wisconsin, which escaped Hüpeden’s, and no doubt the late nineteenth century town fathers’, development dreams.

On the final section of the eastern wall Hüpeden painted a meadow of flowers interspersed with tree stumps, and young growth birch and popple—varieties of succession-regrowth trees that follow deforestation. Here, devoid of ritual overtones, Hüpeden painted the future of the future, bathed in early morning light. It is here that the ritual ends and the landscape continues, recovering peacefully, as it were, after a harrowing drama.

Centered in the south wall is a stage with a canvas curtain, which may have been the single surface that Hüpeden was actually hired to paint. The curtain is framed with trompe l’œil drapery, appearing to have just been swept open and tied back, revealing an exotic, patriotic scene: the USS Olympia in naval combat with the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay, the decisive battle that occurred on May 1, 1898 in the Spanish-American War. The painted curtain portrays an important current event, underscoring the solvency of the Modern Woodmen of America as an insurer, as many benefits were paid to widows of this conflict. At a glance, the maritime scene appears incongruous in a room enveloped in pine forest, but it suggests south as surely as the castle on the opposite wall implies north. Hüpeden signed the stage curtain and dated it 12/20 1899.

As an itinerant painter, Hüpeden could have encountered panoramas in his travels from the East Coast to western Wisconsin, and he may have painted a stage curtain or two. His itinerary is not known, but he very likely would have passed through Milwaukee and San Francisco during the period when the German panorama painters were in residence. Had he seen their grand cycloramas, he may have stepped into the Valton lodge hall and envisioned a gesamtkunstwerk—a total or comprehensive artwork. The Milwaukee atelier disbanded around 1889 when the panorama craze waned, but three of the artists tried to revive the entertainment in San Francisco in 1898, where they created a panorama featuring the Battle of Manila and the single surface that Hüpeden was actually hired to paint. The curtain is framed with trompe l’œil drapery, appearing to have just been swept open and tied back, revealing an exotic, patriotic scene: the USS Olympia in naval combat with the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay, the decisive battle that occurred on May 1, 1898 in the Spanish-American War. The painted curtain portrays an important current event, underscoring the solvency of the Modern Woodmen of America as an insurer, as many benefits were paid to widows of this conflict. At a glance, the maritime scene appears incongruous in a room enveloped in pine forest, but it suggests south as surely as the castle on the opposite wall implies north. Hüpeden signed the stage curtain and dated it 12/20 1899.

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Hüpeden's composition is strikingly similar to the German painters' version (http://clevelandcivilwarroundtable.com/articles/biography/sword_mightier.htm), suggesting that Hüpeden had lingered in the Milwaukee panorama atelier, or at least had seen their grand Battle of Atlanta.

Hüpeden spent the last chapter of his life wandering and painting portraits of farmsteads in western Wisconsin until his death (he was found frozen in the snow, at the Leatherberry farm in Hub City in December, 1911) 

It appears that he was somewhat of a fixture, the resident itinerant artist in the Hidden Valley region. Judson Erwin recalled,

...I knew the man well as he had spent many days at our house painting for my folks and others. He would paint a fine picture of anything you wished for half a pint of whiskey, but he condemned liquor traffic and swore off drinking many times. In conclusion I would say, he was known all over the county. When not drinking he was kind hearted and would help anybody. He did a lot of painting between and in all the neighboring towns and except for his drinking was well liked by all.

Hüpeden painted on canvas, pillow ticking, wood, or whatever materials were available, including objects. Legend has it that if you gave him a bottle of whiskey he'd drain the contents and paint the bottle. If you gave him a pie, he'd eat it and return a painted pie tin.

Erwin recalled,

I have a painting he did for my father on a chest made of...
Ernest Hüpeden: Beyond the Forest

camphor wood, a chest that was through the Mexican War. It’s a China scene and the boat that car-ried the chest to China and back from Mexico before coming to Wisconsin. Hüpeden painted at least a few Civil War battle scenes, as well as western Wis-consin landscapes, logging scenes, por-traits, and memorials. His most commonly commissioned works were paintings of “home places,” a local term for farmsteads. The exhibition Beyond the Forest includes the subject of their painting as the “home place.”

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Historical Society of Wisconsin’s collec-tion depict the convention of showing off a farmstead to its best, idealized advantage: organized landscapes delineated by neat fences, groves of young trees, orderly crops and gardens, an array of livestock, and neatly kept buildings, often with a couple striking out in a horse drawn buggy. (See Res of Almon Jewell, Sec 35 Lafayette TP Wis.) The engravings express intense pride in a productive, orderly farmstead. This genre, and the urge behind it—to express mastery over the land and the promise of the American frontier, achieved—likely informed Hüpeden’s compositions.

five such paintings, capturing the singular features of each property: neat farmhouses anchor tidy landscapes on bright summer days. Smoke rises from a few chimneys; perhaps it is baking day. A windmill pow-ers one farm. It is early in the new century and poles carrying electric lines appear in a few farmyards. Blossoms are in bloom on newly planted trees. Animals graze con-tentedly in barnyards, the hay is mown and stacked, laundry dries in the breeze, a child and dog gambol—nothing is out of place. In three paintings, Hüpeden captured the moment when farm couples, dressed in their Sunday best, are nestled in buggies, squired away by spirited, high-stepping horse teams. Enough work has been done to afford an afternoon ride.

Hüpeden’s farmstead paintings take their place in the history of the depiction of homes and farms in the region, and they bear comparison with the 19th century combined atlas maps. These outsized bound copies feature diagrams of land ownership, generally by county, punctu-ated by engravings of farmsteads. Several examples from the atlas in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin’s collec-tion depict the convention of showing off a farmstead to its best, idealized advantage: organized landscapes delineated by neat fences, groves of young trees, orderly crops and gardens, an array of livestock, and neatly kept buildings, often with a couple striking out in a horse drawn buggy. (See Res of Almon Jewell, Sec 35 Lafayette TP Wis.) The engravings express intense pride in a productive, orderly farmstead. This genre, and the urge behind it—to express mastery over the land and the promise of the American frontier, achieved—likely informed Hüpeden’s compositions.

Below: Ernest Hüpeden, Sauk County Farm. 1902. Oil on Canvas, 51 1/2 x 32”. Collection of Sara Leonard.


Below: Ernest Hüpeden, untitled (farm scene), oil on canvas, 27 x 37 1/4 in., collection of Jim Zanzi.
Paul Seifert (1840 – 1921) emigrated from Dresden, Germany, to Gotham, in Richland County, Wisconsin, about 35 miles from Valton, the general region where Hüpeden wandered and painted. Seifert was a craftsman and taxidermist who is best known for his exquisite watercolor paintings of farmsteads in Richland County and environs. Seifert’s paintings are highly stylized portraits of their subjects. Pierson Young farmstead, Town of Troy, Wisconsin (1885) typifies Seifert’s use of the imposed grid of fences, fields, and structures on the land, punctuated by uniform trees and carefully placed animals. With muted colors and light line work, the paintings have a distinctive delicacy accentuated by wisps of clouds. Seifert’s farmsteads are painted from a distance—not quite a bird’s-eye view, but above and away from the subject. Alex Marr notes, Seifert’s paintings mediate and naturalize inscription of a national mythology—of territorial progress and shared belief that rationality accompanied and facilitated such progress—on the land. Seifert affirms the moral rightness of such inscription by representing the fields and buildings that, for the farmers who commissioned the paintings, amounted to strenuous work. Because he painted for the people who toiled to produce the referent of the paintings, the constructedness of the farm was, historically speaking, given. And Seifert buttressed the purposeful construction of the farms by placing untamed, lushsome hills and clouds behind the farms. A view of individual families working the land, the “nature” in the background shows that the people depicted in the landscapes transformed the land. And the domed skies and fences along the bottom give each farm a sense of place and turn each to its own cosmos carved out of purportedly virgin prairies and forests.25 Both Seifert and Hüpeden satisfied people who settled the land, giving them tangible expressions of their hard work, the transformation of owned property into idealized landscapes that express their ideals. No sense of the incessant toil of farm work is conveyed, only the result, captured in rare—perhaps impossible—perfect moments. Hüpeden painted from a vantage point at the edge of, not quite in, his farm scenes. Hüpeden was, himself, at the edge of, not quite in, the social scenes he traveled and lingered in. The Valley Where The Bluebirds Sing expresses a perfect moment in the voluptuous hills of western Wisconsin, on the edge looking in.


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Since the early 1970s, the John Michael Kohler Arts Center and Kohler Foundation, Inc. have joined forces in saving the work of artist environment-builders. The two institutions have pioneered a model that addresses both the original sites themselves and individual works of art.

Kohler Foundation was established in 1940 by the Kohler family to support the arts, education, and preservation initiatives. In 1959, a group of volunteers who were passionate about the arts, founded the Sheboygan Arts Foundation (SAF). In 1966, Kohler Foundation donated the historic home of Kohler Co. founder John Michael Kohler to the SAF, which, in 1967 formally became the John Michael Kohler Arts Center.

Preservationist Lisa Stone has noted that institutional attention and commitment to art environments is still an exceedingly rare phenomenon, “Vernacular artists’ environments represent an aspect of our artistic culture that has been neglected in terms of custodianship. While art environments are easily celebrated by visitors and scholars, few are able or willing to step up to the task of acquiring and preserving these often-suffering places.”

The Arts Center and Kohler Foundation first collaborated on site preservation in 1974, when Arts Center director and Wisconsin Arts Board chair Ruth DeYoung Kohler advocated for saving Fred Smith’s Wisconsin Concrete Park in Phillips, Wisconsin. Smith had worked on his Wisconsin Concrete Park for over 23 years, eventually creating over 200 life-size and over-life-size sculptures from concrete infused with shards of glass, stones, shells, and other objects, and incorporating historic regional artifacts such as farming and logging equipment. His masterful array was created to chronicle and celebrate Wisconsin Northwoods heritage and culture from anecdote to history, local to national, here to here—told in-between.

After Smith’s death, Kohler Foundation was able to purchase the site. The project entailed a steep learning curve for all involved and extensive damage wrought by a severe storm in 1977 seemed almost insurmountable. A dedicated team of volunteers refused to give up on saving Smith’s American masterpiece and efforts redoubled. In 1978, Kohler Foundation gave the Wisconsin Concrete Park to Price County and today the Park is run and maintained by the non-profit organization The Friends of Fred Smith, who diligently see to the tasks of conservation, fundraising, and making the Park available to all.

Since then, Kohler Foundation and the Arts Center have joined efforts to save numerous art environments and thousands of individual works of art from sites that either could not be saved or had already been dismantled. Kohler Foundation took on preserving Ernest Hüpeden’s Painted Forest in the early 1980s. The mural-bedecked 1897 Fraternal lodge had fallen into disuse in 1925, and, although both structure and murals did survive, time and the extreme seasonal temperatures of South-Central Wisconsin had taken a serious toll.

As Lisa Stone has described, Hüpeden’s road to Valton was a long and circuitous one indeed. The artist’s known history stems largely from regional memories but records indicate that he sailed from Germany to the United States in 1878 on The Herder. With a colorful past behind him, Hüpeden headed west, traveling from town to town on foot and finding work as an interior painter along the way. Details of his first twenty years in America are scant, but it is possible that Wisconsin was the destination he had in mind from the start. Many immigrants sought landscapes similar to those they left in the Old World, and the Upper Midwest offered just this to great numbers of Northern Europeans.

In Wisconsin, Hüpeden spent time in the towns of Baraboo, Cambridge, Hillsboro, Hub City, Ironton, LaFarge, LaValle, Platteville, West Lima, and Yulea before arriving in Valton, where the Modern Woodmen of America (the town’s fraternal organization) were looking for a painter to decorate their newly built lodge. Hüpeden tackled the job in 1899 and completed it in 1901. Hüpeden died in Valton in 1911 but lives on in the community through The Painted Forest and the many paintings he did for local residents and businesses.

The peril of Hüpeden’s masterpiece was brought to the attention of the Arts Center in 1980, which investigated the situation and recommended it to Kohler
Edgewood College Gallery @ The Stream

Foundation as a cultural treasure highly worthy of their efforts. Kohler Foundation was able to acquire the site and, in 1981, began conservation. Efforts on numerous fronts included conserving the entire painted stage curtain, restoring the interior plaster and all of Hüpeden’s original murals, and researching the iconography of the Modern Woodmen of America that Hüpeden’s murals so evocatively depicted. The building was stabilized and Modern Woodmen themselves arranged the donation of some ritual artifacts appropriate to the era in which the Valton lodge thrived.

In 1982, Kohler Foundation gave the restored Painted Forest to Sauk County, and members of the Historical Society of the Upper Baraboo Valley agreed to maintain the site, make it accessible to visitors, and to provide educational materials about the lodge, the Modern Woodmen of America, and on Hüpeden and his works of art.

In 2001, Sauk County determined that caring for the Painted Forest was beyond their abilities and the site was returned to Kohler Foundation. In the decades that had passed, the Foundation had discovered new ways of making site—especially remote entities such as the Painted Forest—viable for public use. Additional conservation was done to the painted interior, operational facets (heating, cooling, and landscaping) of the building were bolstered, and, on an adjacent piece of property, a multi-use studio facility was built to enhance the site’s feasibility as an educational facility.

In 2004, the Foundation gave the Painted Forest to Edgewood College, where it now thrives as a resource for students and educators, artists, researchers, the local community, and visitors from around the world. With the ongoing support of Kohler Foundation, Edgewood College has emerged as an exemplary steward for the work of folk and vernacular artists. With Hüpeden’s Painted Forest serving as the cornerstone of this outstanding collection, Edgewood has created a model among academic institutions that successfully merges preservation, history, art, and education.

In 2007, Ernest Hüpeden was included in the major exhibition Sublime Spaces & Visionary Worlds: Built Environments of Vernacular Artists at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center. It was the artist’s first inclusion in a major exhibition. Hüpeden was celebrated not only as an artist who compellingly recorded Wisconsin landscapes, life and lore from late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but also as part of a continuum of artist environment builders—visionaries able to transform finite spaces into realms of limitless wonder and revelation.

A conference held in conjunction with the exhibition offered tours to the Painted Forest and other Wisconsin art environments, allowing visitors to further appreciate Hüpeden’s work within the greater fabric of art environments, and, following the exhibition the Wandering Wisconsin Consortium was founded amongst extant Wisconsin art environments to emphasize these connections and share resources and networking opportunities.

The Arts Center and Kohler Foundation have been pleased to help bring Edgewood College’s Ernest Hüpeden: Beyond the Forest to fruition—the first solo exhibition dedicated to the paintings by this Wisconsin treasure. Through the auspices of Kohler Foundation, the Arts Center has formed the largest institutional collection of paintings by Ernest Hüpeden apart from The Painted Forest itself.

Endnotes


Ernest Hüpeden Death Record
Below: Undated Photograph of Unidentified MWA Member

Above:

News item in La Crosse Daily Press
"Professor Ernest Hupden, a noted artist from Berlin..." dated December 28, 1896

"This man - Ernest Hupden a Painter" by Ray R. Shuckhart dated October 14, 1984
In Prague, May 31, 1957

Winston Box News

Madam

Dear Mr. Box,

I would be honored if you could forward these pictures and letters to the

Valton Painting

I have never seen the paintings you mentioned, but I know the famous

of the paintings before but I know the famous

two thousand miles away from your house painting for my father

daydreamed) and others.

I would paint a picture of anything you wish for a "full color


But he continued. The Berlin traffic and rest of painting every time.

Four days after he left Germany. He attended this at three
different colleges. We told me, when we arrived but our trip left them
and came to America.

He left because of some trouble with his wife and father,

and he hated the German Military Machine. He was

informed as I knew but in belief and at least was a stop

Socialist. In politics that was all he talked.

He said: "I would love in 'God's country' but someone

calls us must have to fight Germany and he wished he could help

to finish the German Military Machine.

He also informed me that the World's first in the U.S.A.

were classified away from me as well as our other kodak

Frederick and that someone later the situation of the situation was

all be in the hands of a few and the iniquity right"

He said: "I am going there for better schools and college than

but they told me in all of them and will try in time

to make the world and he hated to see them take place. He it

would even the Civil War made Lincoln was nothing but a Shaw

Battler," We only have to look back to 1917-18 and 1945-45.
I have one of his paintings (today my favorite) of a horse.

He hired me to work on a little Saunders Hotel in 1902, that my father gave me on my 17th Birthday.

I am aware of his son's participation in the People's U.S. Bank (1914-1918).

The history of his association with the Union and Civil rights movement by the Pinkerons and other oppositions.

In 1914, he went to work for the Providence Bank of Water and National.

This of course, was to work with the Pinkerons but it shows just what sort of stuff in 1902 and any thing for the Common Schools.

As the result came in 1914 in a letter to Judge Wiseman (cost per story here).

He got drunk, they put him out and he was found dead with his coat in his pocket.

Of course I am not making this statement as a fact.

This was the result that came to me.
Hüpeden's entry in the Herder manifest. The Herder sailed from Hamburg in 1878 and arrived in New York City that same year.