

# John Steuart Curry and *The Tragic*

**K**ansas-born artist John Steuart Curry (1897–1946) was accustomed to controversy regarding his paintings long before one began over his state house murals. While New Yorkers gave him prestigious awards and praised him as a prairie Homer, some people in his native state criticized his images of violent storms, tornados, and fundamentalist rituals, saying these depicted Kansas in an unfavorable light: “[W]hy paint outstanding friekish [sic] subjects and call them the ‘spirit’ of Kansas?” complained one perturbed Kansan.<sup>1</sup> Still, it was to Curry that Kansas turned in 1937 to paint a series of murals in the rotunda and corridors of the statehouse in Topeka.

Curry’s statehouse murals were to depict important events in the development of the state, including the settlement of Kansas and the life of the homesteader. Early on there was criticism, some of which amounted to nitpicking—Curry’s pigs did not curl their tails while they ate, the knee-length skirt of a Kansas farmer’s wife was considered too short.<sup>2</sup> The most vitriolic barrage, however, was aimed at what would become Curry’s most frequently reproduced painting, *The Tragic Prelude*.

At the center of the 31'x 11' mural stands a maniacal John Brown, surrounded by pro- and anti-slavery forces, and two dead soldiers at his feet representing the impending Union and Confederate dead. Curry explained:

In this group is expressed the fratricidal fury that first flamed on the plains of Kansas, the tragic prelude to the last bloody feud of the English speaking people. Back of this group are the pioneers and their wagons on the endless trek to the West, and back of all the tornado and the raging prairie fire, fitting symbols of the destruction of the coming Civil War.<sup>3</sup>

In *The Tragic Prelude*, Curry produced an image of extraordinary visual impact, giving epic dimension to John Brown who, for Curry, was not just a crusader against slavery but a symbol of the need to fight oppression everywhere. Author Theodore Wolff, who spent time with Curry discussing *The Tragic Prelude*, reported “being struck by

the quiet fervor with which the artist spoke of social injustice, the insanity of war, political corruption, and the difficulties endured by the poor and the racially disenfranchised.”<sup>4</sup>

*The Tragic Prelude* evoked strong reactions in Kansas. The violence and fanaticism in the scene did not sit well with all Kansans. To the Kansas Council of Women, “The murals do not portray the true Kansas. Rather than revealing a law-abiding progressive state, the artist has emphasized the freaks in its history [including] John Brown, who did not follow legal procedure.”<sup>5</sup> Bowing to this sentiment, the Kansas legislature in 1941 barred Curry from finishing his commission. In response Curry refused to sign the murals.

To be rejected by people in his native state was absolutely shattering to Curry, according to his wife, and he left Kansas to become the artist in residence at the University of Wisconsin until his death in 1946.<sup>6</sup> His widow blamed the capitol mural controversy and its resultant stress for his premature death.

Curry felt his statehouse murals to be among his best, and over the years they have been recognized as important examples of regionalist art. *The Tragic Prelude* in particular has been praised as a powerful allegory of our nation’s deepest crisis. In 1992, the Kansas legislature issued an official apology for its treatment of Curry, and this native son is once again celebrated in Kansas.

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- 1 “Kansas Has Found Her Homer,” *New York Times*, December 7, 1930, in Patricia Junker, *John Steuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1998), 130; Elsie J. Allen, in M. Sue Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism: John Steuart Curry and the Kansas Mural Controversy* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1986), 31.
- 2 William M Tsutsui and Marjorie Swann, “Kansans and the Visual Arts,” *Kansas History*, 274, 285 [www.kshs.org/features/feat700.htm](http://www.kshs.org/features/feat700.htm)
- 3 Curry in Junker, 231.
- 4 Theodore F. Wolff, “John Steuart Curry: A Critical Assessment,” in Junker, 86–87.
- 5 Kansas Council of Women quoted in Kendall, 131.
- 6 Kathleen Curry in Tsutsui and Swann, 285.



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# Prelude

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*The Tragic Prelude* mural in the state capitol building in Topeka, Kansas, by John Steuart Curry.