THE ENDURING CANVAS

As if reacting to an unseen conductor's baton, Eleanor Onderdonk of San Antonio and Frances Battaile Fisk of Abilene began to assemble the art history of Texas in 1927. They had almost a hundred years of catching up to do, but that was fine with Miss Onderdonk, art curator of the new Witte Museum, and Mrs. Fisk, author of what would become the state's first art history book. Each woman realized that despite Texas' traumatic beginnings and untamed reputation, artists found a foothold. In often difficult circumstances, creative people in 19th-century Texas sought out ways to visually express themselves. This circle of creative Texans rippled into the time of Eleanor Onderdonk and Frances Fisk, ever-growing, just like the state itself.
here were no artists present to witness the violent fall of the Alamo on March 6, 1836, and the decisive Battle of San Jacinto six weeks later. Visually, these events were reported only in crude illustrations appearing in eastern publications. The Alamo in ruins, however, provided powerful inspiration to several early Texas artists, most notably artist-soldier Seth Eastman, who was briefly stationed in Texas with the U.S. Army in 1848-49 (see image on page 12, middle). Not until 1875 was the last morning of the Alamo siege, in all its fury, recreated in an emotionally charged scene by historical painter Henry Arthur McArdle. Theodore Gentilz followed up in 1885 with his own crisply painted version of the final Mexican assault. Before his death, McArdle loaned two large-scale historical paintings, *Dawn at the Alamo* (1905) and *The Battle of San Jacinto* (1895-98) for exhibition in the Texas State Capitol, where they were eventually acquired and remain today as companions to William Henry Huddle’s *The Surrender of Santa Anna*, painted in 1886.

Generally speaking, artists working during the time of the Texas Republic and the early days of Statehood produced works that were documentary in nature, reflecting the artists’ surroundings and observations. Richard Petri and his brother-in-law, Hermann Lungkwitz, both educated in Dresden, Germany, were among the most skilled. The two men, along with other family members, arrived in New Braunfels in 1851 and settled in Fredericksburg. Once there, Petri produced vigorous, sympathetic sketches in pencil and watercolor of Penateka Comanches trading in the area, along with numerous portrait sketches of his own family. He also captured many scenes of rural life in this German community that would have otherwise gone unrecorded.

Hermann Lungkwitz was instinctively drawn to the natural beauty of the environs around Fredericksburg and, working primarily in oil paints, became Texas’ first convincing interpreter of the Hill Country landscape (see image on page 12, bottom). He also specialized in architectural views and produced some of the state’s finest pre-Civil War vistas of San Antonio. Following the unexpected death of Richard Petri in 1857, Lungkwitz spent more and more time in San Antonio, where he partnered with another up-and-coming immigrant artist, Carl G. von Iwonski, to learn an emerging specialty called photography.

Both before and after the Civil War, immigration provided Texas’ continuing infusion of talented artists, and San Antonio was the magnet that attracted them. One of the city’s most extensive artistic legacies was created by French émigré Theodore Gentilz (see first paragraph), who first came to Texas in 1844 and lived and worked in Castroville as a surveyor. He soon opted for life in San Antonio, married in France in 1849, and then returned to San Antonio to teach art at St. Mary’s College. His career would last another 50 years, and during that time Gentilz produced an astonishing number of paintings and drawings of indigenous Mexican citizenry in San Antonio and Bexar County. Though unpolished, he is considered one of Texas’ most historically accurate 19th-century painters and, as an observer of his time, perhaps the most important Texas artist of that century.

Robert Jenkins Onderdonk arrived in Texas about 1879, and except for a five-year stint in Dallas in the 1890s, adopted San Antonio as his permanent home. Here he carved out an astound-
ing legacy as a landscape artist, portrait painter, and teacher. On the strength of his appealing images, Texas art moved to a new level. A similar long-term impact was made by Spaniard José Arpa, who became a fixture atop the hierarchy of San Antonio artists as he shuttled in and out of the city between 1899 and 1932 (see image page 8-9).

Commercial artists found outlets for their talents in Texas as the state’s expanding rail system opened up the region to the outside world. Professional illustrators working for a variety of publications were frequent visitors. Their detailed drawings of public buildings, businesses, churches, schools, and city scenes circulated widely in publications such as Harper’s Weekly and Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, providing visual proof of the state’s transformation. Traveling portrait painters known as limners scoured Texas towns both big and small in search of commissions. Wealthy Texans enlisted traveling decorative artists to create elaborately painted scenery in their homes. Photographers in every corner of the state presented themselves as artists, and their studios as art parlors and art galleries, thus filling voids in the state’s creative matrix.

As the 19th century drew to a close, the center of the Texas art world revolved around San Antonio, but many other artists were active elsewhere in the state. Their presence was amply demonstrated at places like the Texas State Fair in Dallas, where members of the Dallas Art Students League exhibited annually. In 1896, Emma Richardson Cherry of Houston organized an extensive art exhibition for the annual Texas Coast Fair in Dickinson. In addition to her own paintings, Cherry exhibited almost 200 pieces of art by some 50 Texas artists of her acquaintance. Many exhibitors were from the Houston/Galveston area, but others were drawn from Austin, Dallas, and as far north as Sherman.

The Texas Coast Fair exhibition included one work, Galveston Beach, by a little-known immigrant artist named Julius Stockfleth (see photo on page 44, left). Between his arrival in 1885 and the lethal hurricane that struck Galveston in

Robert Jenkins Onderdonk (1852-1917) arrived in San Antonio in 1879. A trained artist, he was a popular teacher and an exceptional painter of picturesque San Antonio scenery (see page 37). From 1889 to 1895 he also worked as a portraitist and art educator in Dallas. Robert Onderdonk’s best known work, The Fall of the Alamo, was commissioned in 1901 and installed in the Texas Governor’s Mansion.

Robert Onderdonk’s eldest son Julian (born 1882) trained in New York with William Merritt Chase and proved highly receptive to his teacher’s outdoor painting methods. Julian Onderdonk returned to San Antonio in 1909 and began his career as a Texas outdoor painter. His ability to depict light effects and colorful plant life blanketing the open countryside around San Antonio caused demand for his paintings to skyrocket. Though he died tragically at age 40, he is remembered as the “Father of Texas Impressionism.”

Eleanor Onderdonk (1884-1964), with her father’s blessing, was trained as a miniaturist at the Art Students League in New York. Her greatest contributions to San Antonio culture came as art curator of the Witte Museum, where she organized many exhibitions and actively assembled the institution’s core collection of early Texas art.—Scott Grant Barker
1900, Stockfleth faithfully painted scenes of the city, its coastline, and the ships that plied Galveston’s busy waterways. Stockfleth, after losing most of his family in the storm, remained in Galveston long enough to produce a number of haunting and heartbreaking images of the disaster. The 1896 Texas Coast Fair Exhibition also included three paintings by artist Frank Reaugh of Dallas, who would soon become known as the state’s most prolific and sensitive observer of longhorn cattle and the wide-open spaces of West Texas.

A new generation of Texas artists, many of them native to the state, got their start in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. Among them was the man fated to become the “Father of Texas Impressionism,” Julian Onderdonk (son of artist Robert Onderdonk), born in 1882 in San Antonio (see image on page 9, top). Murray Bewley, born in 1884 in Fort Worth, would gain his greatest acclaim as a painter in Paris and New York. Sallie Blyth Mummert, a pillar of the Fort Worth art community in the 1920s and 1930s, saw her first light in 1888 in Cisco, Texas. Missouri native Alexandre Hogue and Texas native Jerry Bywaters, born in 1898 and 1906 respectively, would become leaders of the American Regionalist art movement in Dallas. Tom Lea, destined for fame as an iconic painter of Texas and the Southwest, was born in 1907 in El Paso. There were many others.

Where no opportunities existed to encourage the artists in their midst, Texans created them. In 1910, Jennie Scott Scheuber, librarian of the Carnegie Public Library in Fort Worth, launched an inaugural exhibition of paintings by Dallas and Fort Worth artists. The next year she expanded the show to include artists statewide. Gaining in popularity, her Annual Exhibition of Selected Paintings by Texas Artists became a favorite showplace of Texas artists for almost 30 years. Local shows spotlighting the work of artists in a specific locale were first organized in Houston, then, with the founding of the Witte Museum, the idea bloomed in San Antonio. Dallas organized its first Allied Arts Exhibition, designed to promote artists in Dallas County, in 1928. Luling oilman Edgar B. Davis underwrote the Texas Wildflower Competitive Exhibition in 1927, offering cash prizes that included a $5,000 award to the competition’s top painting. These enormous sums attracted scores of entries and triggered some of the finest landscape painting ever achieved within the state. The competition, in an expanded format, lasted until 1929, at which time the Witte Museum built a new gallery to house the competition’s prize-winning paintings. Many of those pieces are still owned today by the San Antonio Art League.

In the first half of the 20th century, Texas artists working in many genres distinguished themselves. Western Art, which celebrates the ranching lifestyle and the American cowboy, was first produced in Texas by men such as Wallace Simpson of Fort Worth (see image on page 16, bottom), Fred Darge of Dallas, and Harold Bugbee of Clarendon. The ranks of Texas’ finest landscape painters included John Eliot Jenkins of Austin, Edward G. Eisenlohr and Frank Reaugh of Dallas, Dwight C. Holmes and Samuel P. Ziegler of Fort Worth (see image on page 9, bottom), Audley Dean Nichols and Eugene Thurston of El Paso (see pages 4-5), along with Dawson Dawson-Watson, Robert Wood, and Porfirio Salinas of San Antonio. Wood, an Englishman, and Salinas, his Texas protégé, were strongly influenced by Julian Onderdonk, who died suddenly.

Frank Reaugh (pronounced RAY) of Kaufman County made his first sketching trip in 1883, traveling a route through Wichita Falls and the Indian Territory. He sought higher art education at the Académie Julian in Paris in 1889 and moved to the Oak Cliff section of Dallas one year later to establish himself as an artist and teacher.

Reaugh’s propensity for arduous travel in pursuit of subject matter was a lifelong obsession. Beginning in 1889, he made yearly sketching trips to West Texas, alone at first, and later accompanied by growing numbers of students. Reaugh and his followers made the trips in horse-drawn wagons until the advent of the automobile allowed for motorized convoys. These annual explorations into West Texas, with all participants sleeping under the stars, continued until 1940.

Reaugh earned fame for his laser-like focus on the Texas longhorn and the landscape once inhabited by this majestic animal. Twenty-four Hours with the Herd, his best-known series of large-scale pastel drawings, was widely exhibited in Texas. Reaugh manufactured his own pastel paints in a custom palette designed to capture the changing colors and moods of the West Texas landscape. Working primarily outdoors, he is believed to have produced more than 7,000 paintings.

—Scott Grant Barker
in 1922 at the age of 40. In Houston, Robert Preusser, a student of Ola McNeill Davidson, emerged in the late 1930s as the state’s first purely abstract painter.

Groups of younger artists in Dallas and Fort Worth carved lasting identities around two distinctly different philosophies of art. In the early 1930s, American Scene painting, or Regionalism, was avidly embraced in Dallas by a group loosely known as the Dallas Nine. The leaders of this group, Jerry Bywaters, Otis Dozier, and Alexandre Hogue, responded to Regionalism’s goal of projecting American art onto the world stage via a powerful and nationalistic point of view. The incorporation into art of clearly American subject matter and social themes was seen as the best way to create this new pro-American art form, and artists were expected to take their inspiration from the places in which they lived. With this philosophical underpinning, the Dallas Nine created a new school of Texas painting, one that examined the fragility of the north Texas landscape, the plight of rural farm families, the diversity of the Dallas population, and the urban environment of the city.

Emerging in Fort Worth approximately ten years after the Dallas Nine was a group known today as the Fort Worth Circle. Led by a fun-loving Fort Worth native named Dickson Reeder (see page 41, bottom right), and his New York-born wife Flora, the artists of the Fort Worth Circle were remarkably apolitical. Taking their cues from European modernist painters, Fort Worthians Bror Utter, Bill Bomar, Kelly Fearing, and Veronica Helfensteller, along with the Reeders and others, quickly realized that art was bounded not by any preset rules but only by one’s imagination. This mindset did not result in a new school of abstract painting, though Bill Bomar and some of the others embraced it. Rather, the approach of the Fort Worth Circle was infused with a certain abandonment and lightheartedness that freed the artists to experiment with subject matter ranging from centaurs to inscrutable women in big hats and to have little concern about what others might say.

In the sweep of 19th and early-20th century American art history, early Texas artists at first survived, then persevered, and finally thrived. Theirs is a story that exactly parallels the struggles and successes of Texas itself. Fortunately, these artists have left behind irreplaceable personal diaries in the form of thousands of drawings, paintings, prints, and sculptures. These artworks and the spirit of those who made them, when added together, reveal the poignant and enduring canvas called early Texas art.

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