JOHN STEUART CURRY

Artist of Rural Life

EARLY LIFE

John Steuart Curry was born in 1897 on a farm near Dunavant, Kansas, the eldest son of an educated family of Scotch Covenanters which had originally emigrated from South Carolina. With the exception of a winter in Arizona at the age of eleven Curry's youth was spent on the family farm in Kansas; he went to high school at Winchester, became a star halfback on the football team, a consistent ten-second performer in the hundred-yard dash and equally outstanding in other track events. At the end of his junior year he left school to study art, first at the Kansas City Art Institute, then at the Chicago Art Institute under Timmons and John Norton, where for two years he managed to support himself meagerly by washing dishes and doing odd jobs wherever he could.

As a special student in 1918 he joined his brother at Geneva College in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, more, it seems, for the sake of playing football than anything else, and remained there until the end of the football season the following year. He then set out in earnest on an artistic career. At Tenafly, New Jersey, he worked with Harvey Dunn, the well-known Saturday Evening Post illustrator, and from that time until as late as 1925 Curry made a good living as an illustrator, being particularly adept at the lusty blood-and-thunder scenes for the Western thrillers of popular story magazines. In 1923 he married and as a successful artist moved first to New York then to Westport, where he established a permanent studio of his own.

ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT

As an illustrator, however, Curry soon encountered difficulties. He did not always adhere to the traditional type of ruddy hero or
smooth-faced pretty girl to which the magazine editors and public were accustomed. He was often accused of trying to make "paintings" out of his illustrations. Problems of composition, of pattern, and of color organization began to absorb him more than the stereotyped representation of the story content. Commissions became harder to find, and he was forced to accept whatever was available to make a living. One such project was an assistant to James Daugherty (1925) on a huge wallpaper-like mural for the Cook Travel Agency's booth in the Philadelphia Sesqui-centennial Exposition.

And so perhaps out of sheer necessity he set himself to the serious painting of pictures like "those of the museums." One of the first of these, "The Fence Builders," was painted in 1924 and exhibited in the National Academy the following year. A cursory view of that work will show what Curry himself felt—that he was not yet fully equipped to handle the task of serious painting. Accordingly in October, 1926, financed through the generosity of Seward Proser of New York, the artist and his wife sailed for Europe and its artistic capital, the much maligned city of Paris.

Curry did not go to Paris for the famed artistic freedom and Bohemian atmosphere of the cafes in the Latin Quarter, but had two definite ideas in mind: One was an earnest desire to learn good draftsmanship, and to that end he immediately entered the studio of the Russian academician Basil Schoukhaeff to begin the long and arduous discipline of anatomy and bone-structure by drawing directly from the model. The other objective was a direct acquaintance with the Old Masters through their works in the museums. He admired Courbet for his solid and convincing realism, Daumier for the sturdy humor and vitality of real life, Delacroix for his color and exciting draftsmanship, and above all the great Rubens in whom all of these qualities were magnificently combined through a remarkably virile and dynamic personality.

RECOGNITION

The results of this training became apparent soon after his return to Westport in June, 1927. Financed this time by his brother, he