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Article Summary: Thomas B Johnson, sometimes blacksmith, sometimes farmhand, drew consistently throughout his life. But it is his metal sculpture into which he put the most of himself and his personal heritage which is most admired by critics and other artists. (The Nebraska State Historical Society received much of the artist's work, including sketch books, his tools, his library and comments jotted down in notebooks following his death.)

Cataloging Information:

Names: Thomas B Johnson, Christina Maddson, Emma Wheatley, Hjalmar Johnson, Louis O Aker, Ezra Meeker, Birger Sandzen, Leonard Thiessen, Fay Sherwin Johnson, Lewis Moffitt, Anton Pearson, Robert Reid

Place Names: Omaha, Nebraska; Antwerp, Belgium; Harvard, Nebraska; Lindsborg, Kansas; Colorado Springs, Colorado; Lindsborg, Kansas; Valley, Nebraska; Seward, Nebraska; Garland, Nebraska; Minneapolis, Minnesota

Keywords: "Blood Cast" [poem]; "Memory of Gifts" [poem]; Bethany College, Lindsborg, Kansas; Broadmoor Academy of Art, Colorado Springs, Colorado; Bethany College, Lindsborg, Kansas; Minneapolis School of Art, Minneapolis, Minnesota; Department of Agricultural Engineering, University of Nebraska; Tractor-Testing Laboratory; "The Phoenix" [metal sculpture]; Koenig Art Gallery, Concordia College, Seward, Nebraska; "Tumpta-Guba" [metal weather vane]

Photographs / Images: Artist Thomas B Johnson at his easel; Young Thomas Johnson assisting in shoeing the oxen of frontiersman Ezra Meeker at a Valley, Nebraska blacksmith shop; Fay Sherwin Johnson as a young woman; The Phoenix

THOMAS BERGER JOHNSON,^{*}
NEBRASKA ARTIST,
1890-1968

By Dolores Gunnerson

BLOOD CAST
(March, 1925)

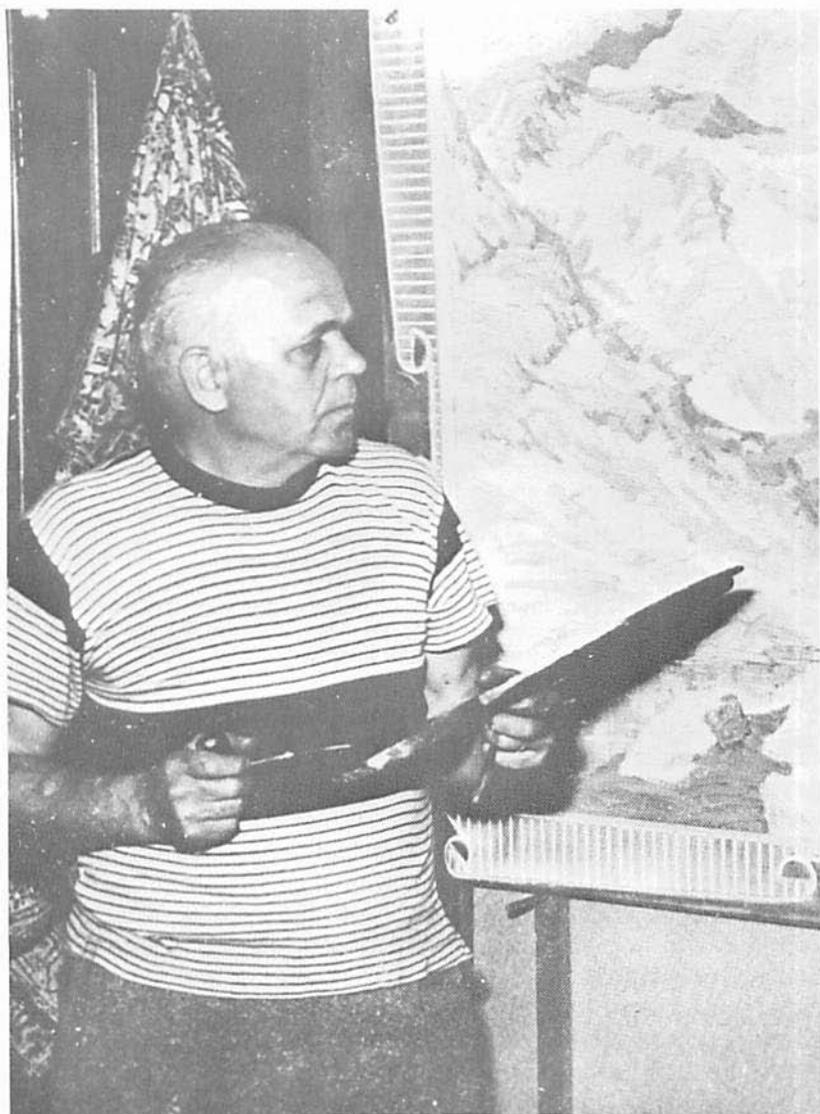
GOD makes many molds—He made mine.
He casts in blood and not in bronze
He waited long for bloods to transfuse and blend to cast me
Bloods flow, mingle, give and pass on.
Bloods of transient Finn, home loving peasant,
Boatswain's mate, laborer, Jew of the council—
Chamber, drunken and irresponsible timber man,
Poured in from diverse sources to formulate the
Blood of pastry cook and adventurous machinist.
From these—He cast me.

After the death of Thomas B. Johnson in 1968 this brief and candid version of his own genealogy was found among his papers, where it had lain in pencilled form since the artist had written it at the age of 35. It was a mature statement by a man physically and spiritually strong who had considered his origins and accepted them long before "ethnicity" was popular.

The "adventurous machinist" of the poem was Tom Johnson's father, who in early manhood had left his home in Sweden to go to sea. After years of sailing he had contracted malaria and was thereafter forced to use his skills on land. Eventually he became a stationary engineer in one of the large hotels in Omaha, where he met and later married the pastry cook, Christina Maddson. Thomas was their second son in a family that included five children.

Tom's interest in art was roused very early by the work of his father, who was both artist and craftsman. While a sailor, the father had sketched the seaports he visited, especially Antwerp, his favorite city. Later, as a stationary engineer, he had time to make minutely accurate ship models, and one, a replica of an

^{*}Thomas Johnson's painting *Village Scene* is reproduced on the cover. See also page ii.



Artist Thomas B. Johnson at his easel.

early combination steam and sailing vessel called "The Neptune," remains a family heirloom.

As a small child Tom began to draw along with his father, who set high standards for the young artist. Fortunately, the boy's ability was also recognized beyond his home. When he was only a second-grader at the Mason Street School in Omaha, Emma Wheatley, the principal, noted his talent and took him to her office two afternoons a week for special instruction. Tom never forgot his debt to the two people who had fostered his ability.

When Hjalmar Johnson finally succumbed to malaria, Tom was only 10 years old, but memories of what must have been a remarkable man prompted him to try, later in his own life, to describe—to mold in words—the personal qualities of the father who had strongly influenced him:

MEMORY OF GIFTS

Poor in chattel—rich in gifts:
 Giving freely—with only himself to give,
 Befriender of stray dogs and homeless men:
 Giving of the contents of his dinner pail
 Only to accept for himself the free lunch
 Given with a glass of beer.
 Known to the derelicts as being generous with
 The warmth of his engine room when the outside
 World refused them a place to sleep.
 God's will wished on him from grateful hearts,
 Speaking through faces dimmed by the prison pallor,
 Heeding not the call of the free and easy hospitality
 Of his favorite land, Belgium, nor a call of the sea, but
 Fighting forward to give, fighting back to obliterate
 Memories of the past.
 Fighting forward to give himself as a mate to a woman
 Of his own blood.
 Giver of memory gifts—memory gifts of sailing vessels,
 Grotesque horse heads, dirty Arab faces, boats and
 Wharfs.
 Memory gifts of Dad.

With the death of Tom's father, it became necessary for his mother to break up the family. The ten-year-old inveterate artist was sent to live with his mother's half-brother, Louis O. Aker, on a farm near Harvard, Nebraska. Tom's years with the Akers and their own five children were for the most part happy ones. He attended a country school along with his cousins, but, impelled by the urge to create, he continued to draw and develop his technique on his own. Much of this work was done behind the corn crib or barn, since his artistic bent was not always under-

stood. These years spent in the Nebraska countryside probably explain, in part, the many canvases he later devoted to landscapes.

At 16, feeling an obligation to help support his mother and younger sister and brothers, he joined them at the home of his maternal grandmother in Stanton, Iowa. The community had only menial work to offer, but Tom's boundless energy and ambition made each new work experience a stepping stone toward future achievement. For a while he worked in Eklof's blacksmith shop in Valley, Nebraska, where his strength was a great asset, and where he acquired a feeling for the nature of metal and its handling. Once Ezra Meeker stopped in Valley to have his oxen shod. The shoes had to be specially forged, but Tom met the challenge and one of the few photographs of Thomas Johnson extant shows the brawny young Swede at 16 with Ezra Meeker and his oxen.

Sixteen years more he labored for his family. Then, at 31, he unleashed his own ambitions and became a still self-supporting but formally enrolled student of art. His training included courses at:

Department of Fine Arts, Bethany College, Lindsborg, Kansas, 1921-1923. (Painting, drawing and art history, Instructor: Dr. Birger Sandzen).

Broadmoor Academy of Art, Colorado Springs, Colorado, 1923-1924. (Drawing from life, Instructor: Robert Reid).

Department of Fine Arts, Bethany College, Lindsborg, Kansas, 1924-1925. (Artist's Certificate, June 4, 1925).

Minneapolis School of Art, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1926-1927.

After formal training, Tom still chose to earn a living by means other than art. A true independent, he wanted freedom to express himself in art as he pleased. His strong affinity for metals led him to take a special course in welding, and in 1930 he began work for the Department of Agricultural Engineering at the University of Nebraska. There he was involved in the on-going development of the Tractor-Testing Laboratory, or "Motor Lab." His work included designing equipment for various experiments, making individual parts, and assembling the whole. Forge work was required, and a great deal of welding; Tom was a perfectionist and the equipment he made reflected his standards.¹



Young Thomas Johnson (right) assisted in shoeing the oxen of frontiersman Ezra Meeker (with beard) at a Valley, Nebraska, blacksmith shop.

Designing mechanisms for new kinds of motor tests required ingenuity, which Tom had in abundance. His contributions to the production of equipment for testing oil filters warranted his being listed as a co-author of a publication describing the devices.²

Through much of the 1930s Tom refined his techniques until he became not only a master craftsman, but a sculptor in metal whose works achieved the status of art. From his own designs for ornamental iron he forged and welded vases, lamp bases, candlesticks, weather vanes and other objects. Meticulously finished products emerged from sheet or bar iron, even from parts of old cars. Unique is a floor lamp named "The Phoenix," made of one-quarter-inch bar iron bent cold in a vice, then welded to conform to his design. The bird is more than six feet high, with a light bulb and shade fitted into the head plumage. The enjoyment Thomas Johnson experienced working with metal is reflected in a statement he often made in later life: "You can't separate a Swede from his iron."

In the 1940s Johnson's work came to reflect increasingly his interest in, and sympathy with, the culture of racial and ethnic groups other than his own. This involvement was due in part to his personal background. As the son of immigrants, in a family left fatherless, he, like Blacks and American Indians, had been part of a minority group. Although his beliefs did not always take conventional forms, he was deeply religious, and had probably been sustained in part by his faith during long years of personal sacrifice. All this, and his gift of song, doubtless inspired the series of large pencil drawings based on Negro spirituals that he did in this period. Later, after much research, he executed other drawings based on American Indian religion, one of which, the last in the series, was left unfinished at his death.

As a student already mature, Tom had enjoyed the advantage of close association with his instructors. The most obvious influence on his work is that of the Swedish-born artist, Sandzen, who came to treat Tom as a friend. Sandzen admired Johnson's metal work in particular, and a bowl and two candlesticks designed and crafted by Tom became part of Sandzen's private collection.

That Sandzen's was not the only influence on Johnson's work, however, was cogently perceived by Leonard Thiessen, Nebraska art critic. After a visit to the Koenig Art Gallery at Concordia College in Seward, Nebraska, where "a merited retrospective" of Johnson's work was on exhibit, Thiessen commented (*Sunday Omaha World-Herald Magazine*, November 23, 1969):

Johnson was in several ways a precursor: his life work reveals a variety of well-integrated sources. Born in . . . [Omaha], he studied with Birger Sandzen at Lindsborg, Kan.

His painting shows the impressionistic, heavy-impasto handling favored by the anti-establishment "Konstnaersforbundet" group in Stockholm, with which Sandzen was allied before emigrating to the U.S.

Long before forged metal sculpture became commonplace, Thomas B. Johnson was creating lovingly crafted iron sculptures sinuously reminiscent of Art Nouveau and prophetic of the "psychedelic" pastiches recently revived.

Before black became beautiful, Johnson was deeply moved by the aesthetic contribution of Black Americans, and pursued his black studies in a series of drawings, "Negro Spirituals."

In 1937 Thomas B. Johnson married Fay Sherwin from Harvard, Nebraska, a graduate of the State University who held responsible positions in Lincoln businesses long after the usual age for retirement. On her mother's side, she was descended



Fay Sherwin Johnson as a young woman.

from Moffitts and was related to Lewis Moffitt, founder of Seward, Nebraska (where she and her husband moved in February, 1956). With this marriage, the artist gained in both personal life and artistic efforts not merely the blind loyalty often expected of a wife, but the support of a woman whose trained mind and strong integrity made her both discerning admirer and unflinching critic. If Thomas Johnson was "precursor" in art with his choice of subjects and styles, Fay Sherwin Johnson was a precursor in the marital "role reversal" considered so modern. She continued her work in the business world while her husband put in long hours over his drawing and painting at home. Otherwise they were much together, often on "scouting" trips near and far to find scenes worth depicting.

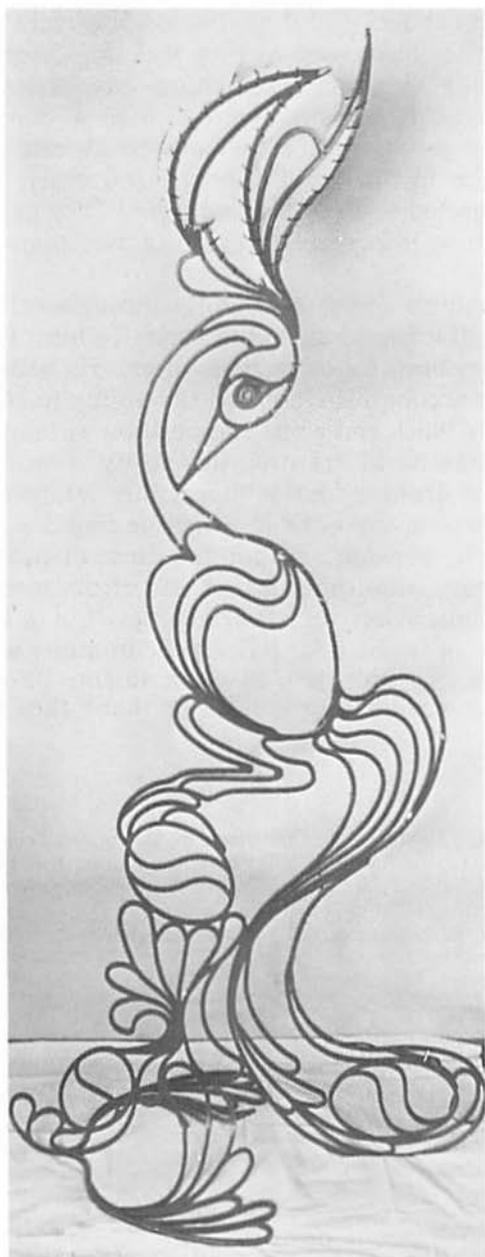
With marriage there came, too, a beginning of "the good life": The satisfactions of a home well tended—a comfortable place to share with guests and cronies the conviviality Tom had felt in his father. The reputation of his homemade wine grew with the years. The objects of art, mainly oriental, with which he surrounded himself shared space with the humorous work of his crony Anton Pearson, the famous woodcarver of Lindsborg. Tom's favorite among Pearson's carvings was the figure of an old, retired Swede, sweater buttoned over his paunch, hands in pockets, the prototype of many such who stood about the streets of Lindsborg basking in the sun. And on the garage of the Johnson home still stands a weather vane, a piece of Tom's iron work—a comic and sprightly little Swedish "Tumpta-Guba" on skates, coat tails flying behind, whose outstretched arm and pointing finger indicate the wind's direction.

At his sudden death in January of 1968, Johnson left more than 40 canvases, his iron work, numerous pencil drawings, and a series of block prints that other artists have called "exciting." The collection represented most of his life's work, because he had seldom been able to put a dollar value on things produced without benefit of dollars. He had preferred, rather, to give—where the recipient appealed to him. Thus, on his widow fell the task of finding a repository for those works not already committed to individuals or institutions.

After years of careful inquiry, Mrs. Johnson became aware that the Nebraska State Historical Society had provided in its charter for the acquisition of art. It seemed appropriate that the work of a native Nebraskan, especially one whose canvases portrayed so many Nebraska scenes, should be preserved in the context where it would be most meaningful. In fact, Johnson's "representational" approach, long out of vogue in the art world, was of positive advantage for Nebraska history. Over the years he had recorded realistically, and thereby documented for posterity, buildings, neighborhoods, and landscapes, some of which no longer exist. Much of the artist's work, including sketch books and preliminary studies, his tools, his library, and comments on art jotted down in notebooks over the years, are now the property of the Nebraska State Historical Society and housed in the Historical Society's headquarters in Lincoln.

Since Johnson's death, interest in regional and representational art has revived, as has interest in crafts; but no matter how the passage of time affects his reputation as a painter, he achieved his own goals. He had reveled in his Nebraska and the painting of it. Often, during and after painting Garland, for example, he drove the few miles from Seward on hot summer days to enjoy a country noon-time dinner there, and a schooner of cold beer. Thus he became a part of the community he painted. As his poem "Blood Cast" shows, he perceived himself as "of the people," and his notebooks reveal that he intended his paintings and drawings to be of and for the people, not for a select few.

His canvases of mountain scenery were, perhaps, the tribute of a strong man to rugged land, but in local scenes, something of the robust appreciation that this sometime blacksmith, sometime farm hand had for his surroundings comes through on his canvases, and the kind of people he painted can identify with



The Phoenix

his work. They can feel that the artist saw a certain hillside farm in March as they have seen it; they feel the shade of trees he painted on one side of a scorching city street. Johnson's exuberant physical strength urged him to action; a stronger urge, and the self-discipline he considered essential for any artist, held him to his drawing board and easel. But into his people he projected some of his own vigor. They move, or are at rest from moving, in postures suggesting movement temporarily arrested.

Thomas Johnson drew consistently throughout his life, and never gave up drawing as an end in itself. To him, good drawing was a necessary basis for other types of art. He believed the true test of artistic accomplishment was the ability to convey a clear impression in a black and white composition without resorting to color for emphasis. In drawing, inferiority is most difficult to conceal, and in drawing he was thoroughly competent. But it is his metal sculpture, the work in which he found most pleasure, and into which, perhaps, he put the most of himself and his personal heritage, that other artists and critics most admire.

Thomas Johnson left very few etchings, but a small etched brass plate on his studio door reflects the humility with which he used what was, to him, a God-given talent: "For the joy of mastery in the work of our hands, we thank thee O! Lord."

NOTES

1. Lester Larsen, retired from the Department of Agricultural Engineering, provided details on the nature of Thomas Johnson's work there. Ralston J. Graham, chairman of the Department of Agricultural Communication, furnished the correct bibliographical citation for the publication that Tom co-authored.

2. C. W. Smith, T. B. Johnson, E. L. Munter, "Oil Filters for Internal Combustion Engines," *Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 334* (University of Nebraska College of Agriculture, September, 1941).