

# Art on Campus Poetry Collection

Public Art Poetry has a tradition dating to Christian and Charlotte Petersen. Christian, a Danish-American sculptor, was artist-in-residence at Iowa State University (then Iowa State College) from 1934-1955, during a time when poetry inspired sculpture and incorporated words as sculptural elements.

A primary tenet of public art is to have it physically and intellectually accessible to the public. Placement within the context of public spaces accomplishes the first goal, however, providing intellectual accessibility is the more challenging goal.

Educational programs for public art are imperative. One educational component that provides access to understanding the Art on Campus Collection is poetry. Several years ago, Neal Bowers, a professor of English at Iowa State University, was commissioned to create poetic

interpretations of some of the Art on Campus sculptures. He did so, and later he also administered, on behalf of the University Museums, a program whereby significant Iowa poets were invited and commissioned to create their own literary interpretations of the Art on Campus Collection. These literary interpretations are greatly appreciated, as are the artists who created them, for they contribute further interpretative avenues, inspirations, thoughts, reflections and an understanding into the Art on Campus Collection.



Andrew Leicester

**G-None**, 1992

Ceramic

Located on the Molecular Biology Building

In the Art on Campus Collection, University Museums,  
Iowa State University.

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IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

**Art on Campus**

UNIVERSITY MUSEUMS AFFILIATE

# Tillage as Art

(after Grant Wood's *Breaking the Prairie Sod*  
based on Daniel Webster's statement,  
"When tillage begins, other arts follow")

In this version of the past,  
life is so simple and pure  
no one has buttons or buckles or pockets.

At sunup, the men step into  
their leotard trousers, shrugging  
suspenders over their shoulders;  
the woman rises like a clapper  
into her bell-shaped dress;  
and they all set out to work  
in the clean earth where no one gets dirty.

Nobody sweats (not even the horses),  
though thirst seems to be a possibility  
as the plowman turns over the plush pile prairie,  
easy as lifting a rug.

In the grove with the wildflower border,  
one of the men chopping trees  
looks like a young Abe Lincoln,  
The job is that noble.

Meanwhile, over this rustic scene,  
art deco clouds drift in,  
streamlined, urban, building  
in the distance like the future  
of everyone's dreams,  
too pure and simple to be true.

**Neal Bowers, 1990**  
**Ames, Iowa**

# Lessons

(concerning Bruce White's sculpture, *Carom* located by Black Engineering)

Who taught aluminum to jive like that?  
Who taught aluminum to dance?  
Look at it twist and dip and split!  
Watch that aluminum prance!

I need to learn some aluminum steps.  
I need aluminum grace.  
None of my limited, minimal moves  
can match aluminum's pace.

How do you limber a sheet of aluminum,  
get aluminum into the mood?  
Would it improve my ballroom style  
if I ate some aluminum food?

What kind of beat makes aluminum shimmy?  
What makes aluminum take  
such a dangerous, difficult, tango torque,  
the kinds my bones can't fake?

Better to let aluminum risk  
those bends that could be breaks.

**Neal Bowers, 1990**  
**Ames, Iowa**

# WORLD AS WILL AND IDEA

The idea set a-sail like  
a luffed number, a four,  
perhaps, or treble clef  
unfurling, borne on and  
bearing its own breeze,  
and ploughing up music  
like the sea, taller  
than a man can stand.

Anyone tells me again  
the body is ninety percent  
water, I'll scream.  
It's a hydraulic system.  
And love is engineering.  
Pier and backbone.  
Cantilever and torsion.  
Dolphin, harp, and anchor.

Imagine her standing here,  
tapping her foot in time.  
The color of her eyes.  
Color of her hair-  
ribbon blowing in the wind.

**Robert Dana, 1992**  
**Coralville, Iowa**

**(after Bruce White's sculpture *Carom*, located by Black  
Engineering)**

# water from stone

by Michael Carey

(Inspired by Christian Petersen's *History of Dairying Mural* located in the Food Sciences Courtyard)

The most beautiful spot  
they say, in Ames,  
in the fall or early summer  
or mid-May is inside  
the Dairy Industry Building.  
Three gentle Jerseys  
reach out from  
the college hallway  
stretching their necks  
from the flat world  
of their maker's hand  
into yours, and  
all of a sudden  
you are no longer inside,  
fresh water streams  
from stone walls  
and pours in a pool at your feet  
holding you  
in its shimmering hands,  
letting you  
dance for a while  
on its trembling surface,  
you on the flagstone patio  
talking with your friends and  
smiling and eating ice cream.

Never have you been  
so unsure of what  
was real and what was not,  
what was moving  
and what was stone.

A huge Jersey bull coddles  
and comforts his cows  
as if you are the strangers here,  
marvelous misshapen lumps  
that have inexplicably found themselves  
on this green and open plain  
hardened by life  
and sadness and curiosity.  
Sixty-five years and no cracks  
have yet ruined this firing,  
these timeless moments in time,  
this groggy Iowa clay  
beaten into handmade ashlers  
and burned sixty hours at a time  
at 500 degrees Fahrenheit the first day, 1800  
the second and 2000 the remaining 58.

It was hard work back then,  
during the Depression, you  
had better believe it, and hot.  
It took stubbornness  
and guts and pain  
to make this quiet moment  
in the Iowa shade,  
this sweet air and sunshine,  
this little bit of peace  
deep inside your present,  
modern, unfathomable work.  
Oh what is beauty?  
What is dust? I say.  
What is dirt?

# Garden of Stone and Light

(inspired by Keith Achepohl's *Garden of Stone and Light*, Durham Center)

Crowds of students must separate around  
this high school jock's dream of phallic symbol,  
pillar of stone that screams domination,  
rocket-shaped in a hall dedicated  
to mathematics, where trajectories  
are planned, programs written for missile paths  
that may blow up villages, hurl children  
like ragged dolls through exploding houses.

When Freud thought he found penis envy in  
Vienna, he disguised the male myth  
of superiority in slick pseudo-  
scientific jargon.  
What woman would  
covet the decoration which in art  
is green-veined marble, but in real life looks  
like a naked turkey neck? I am sick  
to death of solipsisms of old men,  
sick of the society made by math,  
that plots azimuth of murder, washes  
the hands of mathematician, far  
removed from the little girl running down  
the jungle path, aflame with napalm.  
Oh, science, how can I believe you when  
I see her mouth burned away to a black hole?  
The world of power uses computers  
as pimps and whores. Real power resides in  
goodness, which cannot be measured, graphed, or  
recorded. It never shakes seismographs,  
never lights up telescopes, or appears  
in predictable curves of anything.

Here in the Durham Computation Center  
numbers are not gods, neither archaic  
Roman numerals nor subtle Arabic  
whorls. Logic is a dissembler. Pascal  
worked out the formulæ for finding a  
cylinder's surface dimensions, trying  
to forget his toothache. Controlled family's  
money; refused to pay a dowry fee  
to the convent where his sister yearned to  
profess here vows. She spent years scrubbing the  
scully, a lay sister. Psychology  
which claims "to explain everything, explains  
nothing."

Nothing is neutral when in use,  
even the lotus, floating like Buddha  
across the abacus, umbilical  
cord adrift through muddy pond that is both  
and neither time and space. Mathematic  
tradition is not rock but sea; deep in  
the waters of faith Euclid swims, his arms  
metronomes for his backstroke. Computers,  
must be turned toward building the better  
city, must abjure power, the other  
face of genocide.

The force of peace is  
mostly untried. Above this massive stone  
hangs two canvases, intensifying,  
repeating the same colors, except each  
displays a window of sky, small spaces  
brushed with horse tail clouds, cirrus, promising  
three days from now rains will fall like blessings.

**Ann Struthers, 1992**  
**Cedar Rapids, Iowa**

# George Washington Carver

by Neal Bowers

(Inspired by Christian Petersen's sculpture *George Washington Carver* locate north of Caver Hall)

Incredibly small in his black walnut case,  
he might be a doll or a marionette  
with a button on the side to activate him,  
to let him finish that beginning smile  
and offer everyone the peanut  
he holds up like a talisman.

Sprawled around the lobby  
of the building named for him,  
not even those students dozing  
over history and science  
can match his sweet serenity.  
In his face is an enormous patience.

To look at him, you must look through  
your own reflection in the glass,  
your thin immensity clouding this guide  
who waits to lead you through a little door  
into a world where no life is common  
and every atom is a sun.

# Commission

Something to trick the eye  
at the end of the hallway  
or bright for a corner, maybe  
a shade between tangerine and peach;  
anything blue for an out-of-the-way place  
or a tactile centerpiece of polished stone  
to make everyone's hand flutter  
with a need to land there.

Say something to the body  
which has forgotten to listen  
and hear daily the gray  
droning of the brain;  
interrupt the brain's numb monotone  
with the lonely ache of a lost dialogue.  
Shout from the tops of buildings;  
argue forever in the quiet courtyards;  
whisper subliminal code from hooks  
and pedestals in dusty rooms  
in the true language.

**Neal Bowers, 1992**  
**Ames, Iowa**

**(inspired by Richard Haas' *Untitled I and II* murals lo-  
cated in the Agronomy Building)**

# JANUS

Not two-faced,  
but two faces.  
alter and icon.

Not just blade,  
but both edges.  
Cutting down  
or cutting up.

East or West.  
North or South.

Nothing cleanly  
simple's simple.

**Robert Dana, 1992**  
**Coralville, Iowa**

**(Inspired by *Janus Agri Altar* by Beverly Pepper  
located in the Agronomy Building courtyard)**

# Doubleness

## *Janus Agri-Alter*

Doubleness  
of this blade, like the plow,  
symbol of Iowa,  
that tore the prairie, the share that breaks  
the binds: liberates soil's richness,  
opens passages for the breath  
of agriculture; builds barns, silos,  
grain elevators, feedlots, hog confinements;  
the other side of the share  
cuts off buffalo, Native Peoples,  
plows under oceans of prairie lilies,  
the red and gold prairie grasses  
all the creatures that lived  
in there beneficent shadows.  
The wild sacrificed  
to the tame, the unexpected to the usual,  
meandering path of the fox and coyote  
to geometric squares  
of the surveyor. This is the instrument  
for making straight when everyone knows  
the crooked is more beautiful.

**Ann Struthers, 1992**  
**Cedar Rapids, Iowa**

**(Inspired by *Janus Agri Altar* by Beverly Pepper  
located in the Agronomy Building courtyard)**

# Janus Agri-Alter

Look forward, back, forward, back.  
Look out. Look up and down again,  
my face, my face, a blade, a plow.

I watch to keep the furrow straight.  
I rip the sod, drain the slough.  
I plant the seed, the pod, the chaff and grain.

For these are prime:  
first hour of the day, the month, the year,  
first rain of spring, frost of fall.

Root hair, root cap, peduncle and peg,  
ground turned under, alter of flower and grass.  
Big stem, blue stem, violet, sweet william,  
I dig the worm. I split the skin.

I see the sea, the dirt, the floor,  
swing open the gates, the heavy doors.  
For in the beginning is the end,  
and the end is smooth, real, polished steel.

For in the beginning is the end  
when all returns to dust, to rust,  
to one more happy meal.

To one more cell, one more leaf and stalk,  
I call look up, look out, look forward, back,  
to celebrate our sumptuous plate,  
to mourn our prairie lost to corn.

**Mary Swander, 1992**  
**Ames, Iowa**

**(Inspired by *Janus Agri Altar* by Beverly Pepper  
located in the Agronomy Building courtyard)**

# Thieves

## *Janus Agri-Alter*

This double bronze is also  
double brass when Michael Carey  
and Neil Bowers one winter afternoon rub  
their gloves across its striations, pluck music  
from its hollows.

Tap its sounding boards for gongs, cymbals, kettle drums.  
Their rhythms resound in this Agronomy Quadrant,  
poets making themselves heard, stealing art  
from musicians and sculptors. (Poets are  
the finest thieves in the world. Paris  
pickpockets are amateurs compared  
to the most common poet.)

I have stolen the music from Michael  
and Neal, which they stole from the sculptors,  
Beverly Pepper, which she stole from John Deere,  
and the inventor of the snow plows, the inventor of Roman gods,  
and a few others.

I have stolen two or three minutes from your left wrist.  
I intend to steal more if I can. But I have given you  
something, too. Put your fingertips in your right  
pocket's cave. Even if you can't find it now,  
it's there, waiting for you to recognize it,  
something changeable and unchanging,  
metaphor, music, instrumentation.

**Ann Struthers, 1992**  
**Cedar Rapids, Iowa**

**(Inspired by *Janus Agri Altar* by Beverly Pepper  
located in the Agronomy Building courtyard)**

# Left-Sided Angel to Its Critics

And if I am an angel in decent,  
perhaps fallen, in some of its senses,  
What did you expect? A neon halo?  
Wings with feathers from a dancer's boa?  
These are hard times for the spirit—too much  
of everything, too much money, lunches  
on the university's tab, cocktail  
patio parties where the whiners impale  
olives and gerkins. stab colleagues between  
the shoulder blades, slice up their friends,  
roast their students over ruby charcoal,  
resident novelist, in Mark Twain cool  
whites, threatens to put John in his next book—  
as a slimy minor character. Look  
at yourselves. Who's unimpaired, whole? Surprised,  
I watch you watch me through your log clogged eyes.

**Ann Struthers, 1995**  
**Cedar Rapids, Iowa**

**(Inspired by *Left-Sided Angel* by Stephen De Staebler  
located at the entrance to Parks Library)**

# Petition to Remove a Statue

Hunk of shrapnel!  
Pile of mangled bronze!  
We want him down from his one-foot poise.

Victory should be maimed  
but beautiful, not banged-up  
with barely a leg to stand on.

One wing clipped, the other gone,  
how he deforms the whole environment,  
warps the air itself with absences.

If sculpture is pure form,  
or its pursuit, then this nightmare  
comes as close to art

as any freeway accident,  
with us out in the bushes  
looking for the missing limbs.

We want to make him whole,  
in his own perfect image; we want  
him far less human than he is;

but since we cannot heal him,  
and since he wears our wounds so openly,  
by God, we'll have this unright angel down!

**Neal Bowers, 1990**  
**Ames, Iowa**

**(Inspired by *Left-Sided Angel* by Stephen De Staebler  
located at the entrance to Parks Library)**

# HYBRIDS

Aren't we all hybrids  
of dirt and sky,  
of grass and wind  
and animals?  
What pushes light  
pushes us  
from the darkness,  
corn from a seed,  
consciousness from a stone.  
As above, so below  
and below that too.  
Heaven waits  
wherever we are,  
whatever we've become,  
even when we are finished  
becoming  
us.

**Michael Carey, 1992**

# UNTITLED

It may be true, we may be half God  
and half dying animal, still  
we are not as important as it seems.  
Nothing dies but us  
and what needs us  
to survive, only each  
particular incarnation.

This porcelain water  
stands for everything  
seen through different eyes,  
the myopia of science. It is  
the gene pool of the open prairie,  
and man's wild attempt to stir it.  
Stand with reverence before its  
strange reflection. Feel what  
you are and own. Know  
you will dissolve eventually  
into this pool of stone.

**Michael Carey, 1992**

**(inspired by Andrew Leicester's *The G-Nome Project* located  
throughout the Molecular Biology Building)**

# St. Barbara McClintock of the G-Nomes

Protecting the four corners of Molecular Biology,  
terra-cotta creatures, known by artists  
for centuries in other forms—gargoyles  
from the Renaissance? disguised angels?  
gods of Aruba cloaked in Mayan robes?  
these G-nomes, regulator genes, controller genes,  
color conductors, turn maize kernels red,  
black, pale yellow, ride protein horses,  
are heritage policepersons,

O, scientists,  
remember unscientific brainlock that kept  
Barbara McClintock's work from recognition  
thirty years. She found maize ring chromosomes  
that break, repair themselves,  
alleles that jump like grasshoppers, kick  
up their heels, pack their DNA, move  
although it wasn't proven until  
the electron microscope. She asked herself  
"What would I do if I were a maize G-nome?"

Get into the kernel's starchy white heart.

Alone she maps the first controlling element,  
develops a "slightly scandalous suggestion"  
contrary to the accepted theory that genes  
were strung together like a train on a track  
Linear and fixed. Barbara finds  
they jump the rails, uncouple  
themselves, recouple, insert themselves  
between other elements, turn other genes  
off and on like signal lights.

Her powers of perception so refined she knows  
each plant by name, records each day's differences.  
Under a microscope, sees "internal parts  
of the chromosomes." She "...feels as if  
I were right down there and these were my friends."

Dismissed by authorities in her field,  
a geneticist, calls her "just an old bag  
who's been hanging around Cold Spring Harbor too long."  
Lederberg called her "either crazy or a genius."  
She asks him and his colleagues to leave  
her lab, throws them out for their arrogance,  
"She feels she has crossed a desert alone  
and no one has followed."

Thomas Aquinas saw seraphim.  
Robert Millikan saw electrons.  
Albert Einstein saw mathematics,  
envisioned travelling on a beam of light.  
Barbara McClintock sees chromosomes,  
sees their parts, skittish G-nomes,  
"after synapses...they elongate, get fatter,  
...after anaphase in the first division...  
they just unravel...second division...  
chromosomes elongate--hugely long arms coming down..."  
constantly changing; "...they can do anything."

Saint Thomas, Robert, Albert, Barbara,  
and four G-nomes above our heads,  
protect these classrooms, greenhouse, laboratories,  
empower all the microscopes, magnify the pure light  
of reason, shower largess for unconventional  
science; encourage the open mind.

The darkness opens a little from time to time.

**Ann Struthers, 1992**

**(inspired by Andrew Leicester's *The G-Nome Project* located  
throughout the Molecular Biology Building)**

GAIA:  
MOSAIC ON THE FLOOR  
OF THE MICROBIOLOGY BUILDING AT IOWA  
STATE UNIVERSITY

by William Irwin Thompson

Look in a dog's eyes.  
The world he sees is colorless.  
Your eyes have three types of conical receptors.  
His only have two, so he is left forever in moonlight.  
You can't tell him how brilliant the air is  
after a rain when the sun shines through it.  
How do you explain a rainbow? I don't mean  
reflection or light simply bent into the spectrum,  
but the shimmer and glimmer on deep down things.

And a bird's eye has four.  
What does she see, I wonder,  
that we miss, and what about  
the others who have more? What  
interpenetrating worlds do they see  
falling from a tangle of hair,  
from the soft lowering of voice?  
What universe, what consciousness  
dwells in a cell, in the spirochete?  
What mind binds the heavens?

**(inspired by Andrew Leicester's *The G-Nome Project* located  
throughout the Molecular Biology Building)**

# Applied Science

(inspired by George Greenamyre's *Start to Finish* located at  
the Applied Sciences Complex)

Because three left turns make a right,  
and the way down is the way up,  
the way in the way out,  
but most of all because  
the beginning is the end,  
where we are going looks  
remarkably like where we've been,  
ourselves growing small  
headed out for the horizon,  
looming large coming back,  
smug with solutions  
for such easy puzzles,  
devising a machine to settle everything,  
immense in our littleness,  
tinkering with the world.

**Neal Bowers, 1992**  
**Ames, Iowa**

# The Stride

I step and stride and keep a steady pace.  
What laps, oh what long laps I ran  
around in circles before this day began  
to train my aching muscles to ready for the race.

We spend ourselves and pay our dues, the price  
for minutes saved—a second off the best, a man,  
a woman out in front, trial down,  
heat won, our gain, the very time we lose.

Neck and neck, I am but a nose ahead.  
I am but a breath, a molecule of air.  
What's never really seen, to coin a term,  
is my reserve, the fuel, smokey furnace fed.

My will, my all, I hold until the end.  
Then dash and sprint, and watch my money burn.

**Mary Swander, 1992**  
**Ames, Iowa**

**(inspired by Willam King's *Stride* located at the Lied Recreation Center)**

# Palimpsest

You are here.

~~Notation on Concourse Maps

Let Y be your destination, the unnamed  
place beyond the flickering fluorescence  
of corridors, the terrazzo floors worn smooth

from the shoes of the dead. Let X be  
your present location, the uncharted  
space between pencil and chalk marks,

the keypad's incessant clatter. Listen,  
you are here, a blip on a screen, transfixed  
between home and away. It is possible

to create a life, doors opening to other  
doors, the fresh breeze of tomorrow  
rushing in to make the world new

each day. The canvas remembers  
its maker, inside the hairline grooves  
under the brushstrokes live the barest

traces--whispered thoughts, words  
spoken, mundane as groceries, bills  
and gasoline. The fingerprints

of the dead are everywhere, the tiny  
whorls like plots to cities where one  
could spend a life. Best to find

your own path, chart the roadmap  
etched under your skin, sit down,  
get to know the wanting of your feet.

**Debra Marquart,  
Assistant Professor in English**

**(Commissioned in 1997 after Doug Shelton's mural *Unlimited Possibilities* located in Parks Library)**

# Walking the Landscape

(titled after Keith Achepohl's painting *Walking the Landscape*  
located in Black Engineering)

Think of civilization as a wall,  
of history as graffiti.  
Starting with the innocent pornography  
of Eden, we can sketch it all

in chiseled stone, in chalk, in berry stains,  
or omit the darker parts to paint  
only lovers bunched like flowers, faint  
along the fractured blocks but luminous.

We can let the tumbled sections stand for war,  
the brilliant landscape showing through  
the gaps and shattered mortar with a view  
that rivals heaven but as near

as breath or touch, through only hearts can move  
through such terrain precipitous as love.

**Neal Bowers, 1990**  
**Ames, Iowa**

# HARD LABOR

For John Madsen

(inspired by Grant Wood's mural *When Tillage Begins Other Arts Follow* located in Parks Library)

I  
The purest form of hell  
is threshing in Iowa  
in July or stacking bales  
of straw or wheat  
on the wagon  
or in the hay mow.

Under the cuffs,  
under your collar  
chaff blisters  
the skin into boils,  
your body drenched  
in a sweat  
that will not  
cool or wash  
away the dust  
from the eaves  
or the dirt in the air  
you can't breathe  
anyway, because  
it's been smothered  
in 110 degrees  
and 82 per cent  
humidity.

II  
The further we get,  
the prettier the picture,  
the softer the line  
on the rough edges  
of the wagon. Even  
pigs fall silent  
as men measure  
their medicine.

No one moves  
their sullen faces,  
no one smiles,  
not the boy  
with the head  
of his father,  
not the quiet wives  
with their needles  
and thread and china.

It is the distance  
they stare into,  
the soothing balm of years.  
Step by step, we leave them  
to their never-ending chores.

Step by step, we rise  
like the painted butterflies  
on the wallpaper or are they  
leaves blown in on the sudden wind,  
the white window left open,  
caressing our brains  
into different bodies  
that see and touch and do,  
now, different things,  
softer things, strange things  
in a world, we love, like them,  
and cannot understand.

**Michael Carey, 1992**  
**Farragut, Iowa**