

Food Sciences Building

title *History of Dairying Mural*

artist **Christian Petersen**

Location:
Central Courtyard,
Food Sciences
Building
Materials:
Terra Cotta
Date:
1934
Size:
6.8 x 80 ft.



Detail of the *History of Dairying Mural*.

About the Mural

This mural, made up of six panels flanking a central fountain, depicts the history of the dairy industry in Iowa and America. The first three bas relief panels of the courtyard mural, located to the left of the fountain, show the 19th century processes involved with the dairy industry. At that time, everyone in the family took part in the milk production process: hand milking, straining and butter churning, and hauling milk to town were all part of the process before the advent of technological advances. The three panels to the right of the fountain portray milk and cheese production in about 1934. By this time, dairy operations had moved away from the farm into production at large facilities and had become an area of study at the Iowa State College. The far right panel features a mechanical milking machine and the other two panels represent a Babcock testing machine and equipment for pasteurizing, cooling and cheese making. In the center of the six panels, a bull gazes over three Jersey cows drinking from the fountain overflowing to the pool below.

This bas relief mural is the only known existing sculpture created in Iowa under the Depression-era Public Works of Arts Project. The style is characteristic of Grant Wood's Regionalist style, depicting images as flattened and simplistic, almost folk-like. Petersen's knowledge of art history is apparent throughout this work, along with Art Deco influences, shown by his overlap of geometric design and repeated forms.

History of Dairying Mural

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About the Artist

Christian Petersen, (American, 1885-1961) practiced his art during a transitional stage in American sculpture when styles moved from heroic to realistic. He immigrated to America from Denmark with his family in 1894. After attending several different art schools, beginning a die-cutting career, and receiving sculpture commissions, Petersen moved to the Midwest. It was here that he was invited to join the Iowa Public Works of Art Project under the direction of Grant Wood in Iowa City. In 1934, Iowa State President Raymond Hughes offered Petersen a one-semester residency to create the fountain and bas-reliefs in the Dairy Industry Building courtyard. One semester turned into 21 years, and from 1934 to 1955, Petersen served as Iowa State's sculptor-in-residence. At the time, he was the only sculptor-in-residence at any college or university in the United States, for which he earned \$25 per week. Petersen created 12 major public art sculptures on the Iowa State campus.

Art on Campus Poetry

water from stone

by Michael Carey

Inspired by Christian Petersen's *History of Dairying Mural*

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?

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Iowa State University **Ames, Iowa**