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-Nome, 1992
Ceramic
Located on the Molecular Biology Building
In the Art on Campus Collection, University Museums, Iowa State University.
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)
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 misshappen 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?

water from stone
by Michael Carey

(Inspired by Christian Petersen’s History of Dairying Mural located in the Food Sciences Courtyard)
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 formuli 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 scull, a lay sister. Psychology which claims “to explain everything, explains nothing.”

Nothing is neutral when in use, even the lotus, floating like Budda 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
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.
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 located 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 there 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)
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, 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.”


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)
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)
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)
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,
soft things, strange things
in a world, we love, like them,
and cannot understand.

Michael Carey, 1992
Farragut, Iowa