Masters Of The Golden Age

Harvey Dunn And His Students

By Stephen May

STOCKBRIDGE, MASS. — Harvey Dunn (1884–1952), a distinctive illustrator, painter and teacher, was born on a homestead farm in South Dakota. He and his tenacious parents endured years of harsh weather working to make their frontier land productive. Harvey attended a one-room school and, by 14, tall and muscular, he could do a man's work on the farm. With the help of a supportive mother and an influential teacher, Dunn enrolled at what is now South Dakota State University and later studied at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Dunn surrounded "Jedediah Smith in the Badlands," 1947, with the prairie landscape that was so familiar to him.

Page Above: Dunn observed the enthusiasm with which prairie school kids welcomed their dismissal at the end of the day in warm weather, as exemplified by "After School," 1950.

The undated portrait of "A Driver of Oxen" shows a stalwart homesteader at work, an activity familiar to Dunn.

Dunn's masterpiece, "The Prairie is My Garden," shows that this homesteader and her two daughters have tamed the land around their house and can now gather prairie flowers from it.

Dunn's achievements are showcased in the revelatory exhibition "Masters of the Golden Age: Harvey Dunn and His Students" at the Norman Rockwell Museum. Following its close there on March 13, the show travels to the Hunter Museum of American Art in Chattanooga, Tenn., from June 24 to September 15. Accompanying the exhibition is the illustrated catalog *Masters of the Golden Age: Harvey Dunn and His Students*. The volume features a checklist, introduction by Norman Rockwell Museum deputy director and chief curator Stephanie Haboush Plunkett, plus essays by South Dakota Art Museum director Lynn Verschoor and artist Dan Howe.

At the Art Institute of Chicago, Dunn met illustrator Howard Pyle, who invited the fledgling artist to study with him at his school in Wilmington, Del., and Chadds Ford, Penn. An attentive pupil and hard worker, Dunn thrived under Pyle.

"Dunn's South Dakota prairie background, combined with his legendary work ethic, was the stuff of American folklore. He quickly grasped Pyle's philosophy and added a sodbuster's grit.... He was the size of a linebacker and spoke of art like Vince Lombardi — and he had a lot to say," says Howe. A painting for Dunn started with his "complete immersion into a

Prairie school kids trudge home through snowy fields in frigid temperatures in "School Day's End."

This strong painting, designed by Dunn as a story illustration, is "Billy Boy Would Admit to Nothing More Reprehensible Than Falling in Love," to accompany "The Land Just Over Yonder" by Peter Kyne, The Saturday Evening Post, March 27, 1915. Collection of Murray and Carol Tinkelmann.

"The Return" depicts the differing reactions of young and old to the aftermath of a World War II bombing.

subject," as Pyle recommended. He then orchestrated the lighting to apply it to aspects of the composition and reduced figures and objects to simple shapes. Howe concludes, "He was after bigger game, a higher purpose. He was after the spirit of the picture."

Dunn's art demonstrated that he possessed frontier-shaped tenacity, strength and resourcefulness. In line with Pyle's admonition to know a subject firsthand before trying to depict it, Dunn painted what he knew to be true. He recognized that depicting his memories as a sodbuster represented a rich trove

of prairie experiences that could be turned into art. He expressed the wish "to paint with the strength of a crowbar and lightness of a feather" in scenes in which everyday tasks are often performed under challenging circumstances. While embracing much of Pyle's teachings, Dunn remained his own man. He continued to hone his keen sense of observation, recollection and humanity.

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As an Army illustrator with American troops in France in World War I, Dunn observed combat like that depicted in "Street Fighting," 1928, a cover illustration for *The American Legion Monthly*, September 1928.

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