

Karl Kappes: Ohio Realist & Impressionist

by Laine Snyder

Like many American artists of his generation, Karl Kappes (1861-1943) began his artistic education as an academically trained realist and ended it as an Impressionist. An installation of paintings chronicling the long and distinguished career transitions of this Zanesville, Ohio native is now on permanent view at the

Zanesville Museum of Art in the Dr. and Mrs. Juan Lacerda and the Dr. Carl Mining Galleries.

Born in May 1861 in Zanesville, Ohio, Charles A. Kappes developed an early interest in art, which prompted his parents to enroll him in drawing classes with local Ohio artist Charles Craig. Later in life, Kappes reflected on his early training in the *Zanesville Times Signal*: "I had the pleasure

Karl Kappes: Ohio Realist and Impressionist is on permanent view at the Zanesville Museum of Art, 620 Military Road, Zanesville, Ohio, 43701, 740-452-0741, www.zanesvilleart.org.

of taking lessons in art with Charley,... He was a fine teacher." Craig was a self-taught artist who had recently returned from travels that took him up the Missouri River



LEFT: *Kappes's Garden*, 1936, o/c, 30 1/8 x 34, gift of the artist.

RIGHT: *Corn Shocks*, c. 1925, o/c, 27 3/4 x 32 3/4, gift of the artist.

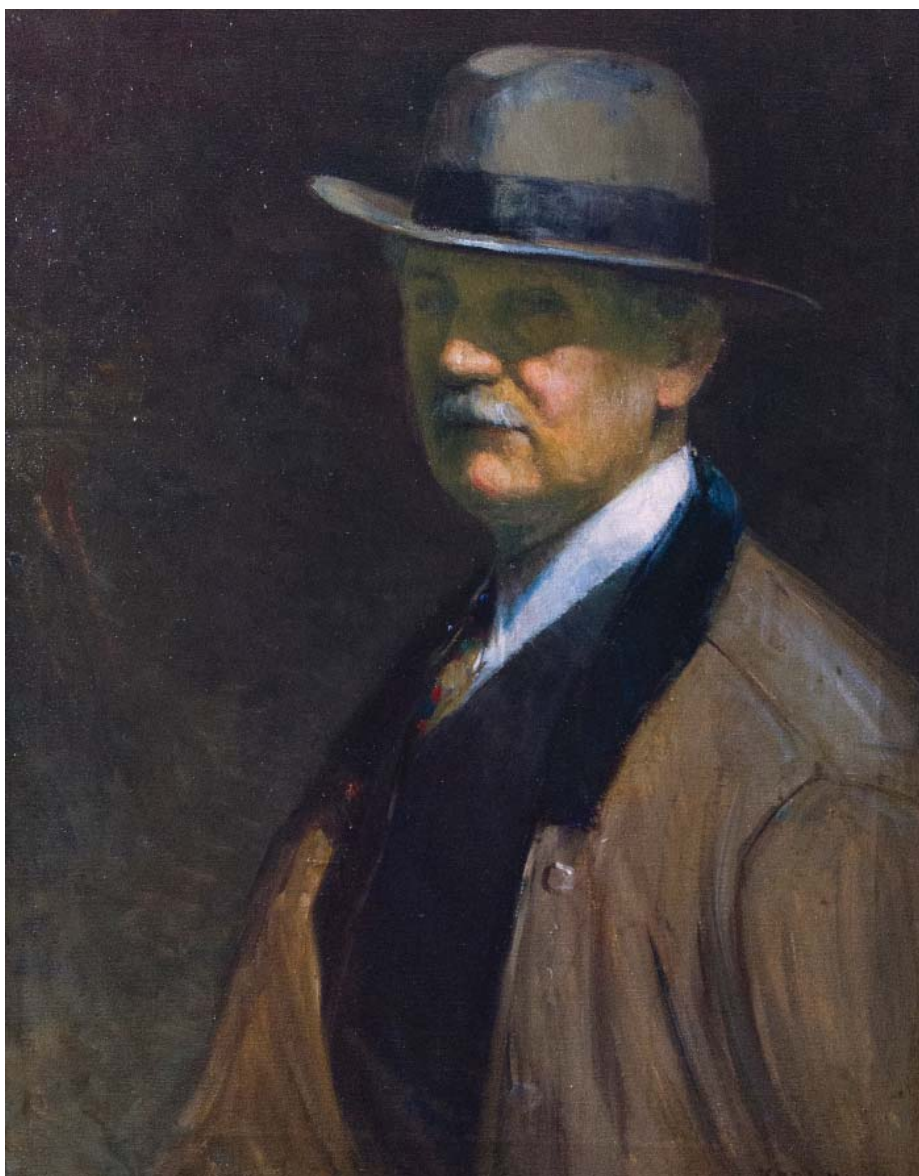
BELOW RIGHT: *Self-Portrait with a Hat*, c. 1930, o/c, 35 1/2 x 29 1/2, gift of the artist.

and as far west as Fort Benton, Montana, and who would become known later in his career for his ethnographically accurate scenes of American Indian life.

Shortly after graduating from Zanesville High School in 1879, Kappes left Craig's studio and enrolled at the McMicken School of Drawing and Design in Cincinnati, Ohio, which was founded a decade earlier. Its mission was to promote "taste and design in the industrial arts." Little is known about his training in the Queen City, but Kappes seems to have excelled in the short period he studied at the McMicken School. He achieved an award of distinction, which likely provided him the encouragement he needed to travel to New York City and enroll at the Art Students League. By 1883, Kappes was skilled enough to gain entry to the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich.

Following in the footsteps of other young aspiring Midwestern artists during the last several decades of the nineteenth century, especially those with German heritage like John Ottis Adams and William Jacob Baer, Kappes travelled to Munich and enrolled at the Academy. The Bavarian city had gained a distinguished reputation among artists as a cultural destination with a state-sponsored art academy. It was also praised in America for its high artistic standards, thorough instruction, and the relatively low cost of tuition, with foreign students paying the same fees as Germans. At the age of twenty-two, and with his parents' financial support, Kappes began a course of study that profoundly impacted his artistic career.

Upon his arrival at the Academy in November 1883, in a letter home to his parents he described being one of "seventy Americans here all attending the art school..." out of several hundred students. Already a skilled draftsman, Kappes prepared an examination drawing that qualified his entry into the *Antikenklasse*. He spent less than a year drawing from antique plaster models before securing a position in the *Naturklasse* in April 1884, where he drew and painted from live mod-





els and demonstrated his sensitivity as a portrait artist.

Kappes's Munich period is defined by his portrait drawings and paintings, which were deeply influenced by Wilhelm von Diez and Ludwig von Löfftz, both popular at the Academy for their unorthodox instruction and their embrace of the Dutch masters. Löfftz, in particular, had a flare for drama. He preferred elderly models, lit dramatically by candlelight. In the artist's earliest portraits, sitters young and old, grand and humble, emerge from an opaque and shadowy background. Using a reserved color palette and vivid lighting, Kappes draws attention to the nuances of the models' features and expressions in order to evoke their character.

While aspects of Kappes's style foreshadowed his future Impressionist tendencies, including his rapid approach to painting, loose brushwork, thick application of pigment, and the canvases' lumi-



ABOVE: *Sunny Road*, c. 1920, o/panel, 14 x 12, gift of Mr. Ray Tanner.

RIGHT: *Mrs. Jacob Kappes*, c. 1880, o/c, 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 20 $\frac{1}{4}$, gift of the artist.

LEFT: *Riverview*, c. 1925, o/c, 26 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 31 $\frac{3}{4}$, gift of Mr. John Rogers.

BELOW LEFT: *Sketching Near Studio, Texas, Ohio*, c. 1925, o/c, 24 x 31, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth Tussing.



nous surface quality, his Munich Academy training continued to have a profound impact on his work throughout his sixty-year career and not just stylistically. From 1885 onward, the artist changed his name from Charles to Karl, preferring to use the Germanized version of his name that was given to him at the time of his enrollment at the Munich Academy.

During the 1880s and 1890s, Kappes traveled back and forth between the United States and Europe, continuing his studies and further developing his technically precise skills and emotionally insightful paintings. Longing for a “proper place for an art student...where there is plenty of life,” in May 1890, Kappes enrolled at the Academy Julian in Paris, where he studied with Jean Paul Laurens and Benjamin Constant. While the excitement of the city of lights may have suited him, he quickly tired of the training, which he characterized as “less rigorous” and “inferior” to that of the Munich Academy.

It was at this stage in his career that Kappes began landscape painting. While an accomplished portraitist, these works may have been a means to an end, and likely helped him to pay his tuition and to travel

the European countryside to sketch its scenic beauty. While no landscapes from this period have emerged, Kappes described trips to the German and Austrian countryside and boasted about the progress he made in his informal landscape studies, writing, “I was much surprised to learn that my friends did not credit my last work to me they said it was too good for one that has not studied as long as I have.”

Kappes never rejected his hard-earned regional, national, and international training. Instead, he embraced his predecessors’ techniques and teaching methods and when he returned home to Zanesville, Ohio, in 1901, he taught the next generation similar techniques in his private studio and also accepted a position leading the art department at Weller Pottery—an interna-

tionally recognized leader in the manufacture of art pottery. There, Kappes not only decorated ceramics with highly nuanced portraits of Native Americans and beautiful flora, he also taught other Weller decorators like Will Rannells, Andrew Loomis, and Stanley Thompson who would go on to become prominent artists.

By 1912, when Kappes was fifty-one years old, he left the industry and moved to Toledo, Ohio, where he continued to paint and where he became a highly sought-after instructor. After 1918, he and many of his students spent summers at his rustic home and studio in Texas, Ohio, located roughly thirty miles southwest of the city. Here, along the banks of the Maumee river, Kappes’s dark, naturalistic portraits gave way to light, Impressionistic landscapes.



ABOVE: *Meditation*, 1881, o/c, 47 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 39 $\frac{1}{4}$, gift of the artist.

LEFT: *Back Street in Toledo*, c. 1930, o/board, 20 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 18 $\frac{1}{2}$, gift of the artist.

BELOW LEFT: *Farmhouse, Sun and Shade*, c. 1925, o/c, 15 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 17 $\frac{1}{2}$, gift of Mr. Ray Tanner.

RIGHT: *Back Street*, c. 1925, o/c, 27 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 31 $\frac{1}{2}$, gift of Mrs. Betty Hay Miller.

BELOW LEFT: *View of Maumee*, c. 1930, w/c on paper, 19 x 22 $\frac{1}{2}$, gift of the artist.



Unlike his early wanderlust, which took him abroad, Kappes now ventured closer to home and into his own backyard. Developing a softer color palette, looser brushwork, and a preference for natural light, he depicted the fields, white clapboard houses, flower gardens, and the meandering dirt roads of Henry County. These domesticated rural landscapes are nostalgic tributes to an earlier way of life. As an American Impressionist, his work evokes a simpler time, despite the remarkable industrial and economic changes taking place around him in the first several decades of the twentieth century. Kappes embraced Impressionist techniques and immersed himself in Ohio's picturesque scenery capturing the charm of country life, omitting visible evidence of modernity.

This was a prolific period in the artist's long career, and during temperate months, he sketched and painted outdoors, *en plein air*, capturing the subtle effects of light on a sun-dappled tree or the dramatic shifts in color on a beautiful autumn afternoon. He



was not alone in Texas, Ohio, and attracted fellow artists and students to the area in the summer, which became a popular destination. “In the summer, it seemed there was a painter for every tree in Texas,” remarked Vardinique North, the wife of painter Earl North, who was also a Kappes student.

Over the course of Karl Kappes’s long and successful painting career he exhibited his paintings at the National Academy of Design in New York, the Royal Academy in Munich, the Detroit Institute of Art in Michigan, and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. The portrait and landscape paintings by Karl Kappes, in the permanent collection of the Zanesville Museum of Art, came to the museum from many private collections including the artist and Mrs. Elizabeth Greiner Kappes and Mrs. Edward M. Ayers, Karl Kappes’s sister and the Zanesville Museum’s cofounder.

