

Homesteads of the Free:

The Art of Maude J. Mitchell (1875-1957)

June 4-July 5, 2011

*We cross the prairie as of old
The pilgrims crossed the sea,
To make the West, as they the East,
The homestead of the free!*

From the poem, "The Kansas Emigrants," by John Greenleaf Whittier, written for the August 29, 1854 departure of the second party of New England Emigrant Aid Society to Kansas

Maude J. Mitchell's life and art cannot be appreciated fully without an understanding of her family's ties to the Civil-War history and Flint Hills geography of Wabaunsee County, Kansas. This selection of the artist's paintings, many of them recently conserved, introduces her abolitionist family's story and testifies to Mitchell's abiding love for the region her relatives and others fought to make free from slavery. The exhibition has been organized in conjunction with the 2011 Symphony in the Flint Hills, whose theme is "Freedom's Frontier in the Flint Hills," by the Wabaunsee County Historical Society, with assistance from Kansas State University's Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art and the Mt. Mitchell Prairie Guards.



Quaker poet and abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier never moved to the Kansas Territory, as his poem suggests, but with his pen he offered strong support for abolitionist pioneers such as Captain William Mitchell, Maude's father. The Scotland-born Mitchell was a member of the Beecher Bible and Rifle Colony who arrived from Connecticut to the present town of Wabaunsee in 1856. Mitchell became the leader of "The Prairie Guards," who helped defend Lawrence from pro-slavery factions. He and his sister Agnes operated an Underground Railroad station at his home three miles east of Wabaunsee until the end of the Civil War.

Maude Josephine Mitchell was born in 1875, the only girl of four children raised by William and Mary Mitchell. Maude, later a champion of public education in Kansas, attended Wabaunsee County's District School No. 2. She left for the east coast in the 1890s to study at New York State Normal College at Buffalo and Columbia University in New York. Mitchell also trained at the Art Students League in New York and the Woodstock Art Colony in the 1910s. The artist began a career as an art supervisor in the public schools of Dubuque, Iowa. She later spent thirteen years as head of the art department at the Platteville State Normal School in Wisconsin.



Following her mother's death in 1915, Mitchell returned to Kansas to manage the family's Big Four Ranch. She continued to pursue her painting, exhibiting her work with contemporaries from the state such as Birger Sandzén, Margaret Whitemore, Kenneth Adams, and Mary Huntoon.

Mitchell became known for her views of local farms in oil and watercolor, displaying, as one critic described, a "familiarity with Kansas scenes and a comprehension of the difficulties of catching the ever-changing, ever-varying moods of a hill and sky country." In addition to an emphasis on light and color in the changing seasons, an influence of her training during the height of American impressionism (1890-1910), Mitchell brought a landowner's eye to her imagery. Her work documents crop production, cattle grazing, flooding, vernacular architecture, and the limits of the acreages of area settlers and newcomers.

Mitchell had a vital interest in all public affairs. She wrote progressive editorials for the *Wabaunsee Truth* newspaper in addition to publishing poetry and political cartoons. The artist cherished her role as a preserver of the county's history, especially its abolitionist and then integrated Beecher Bible and Rifle Church. Among the artist's accomplishments was designing the stone gateway for the integrated Wabaunsee Township Cemetery, where she is buried. Carved on the gate is the first stanza of Whittier's poetic tribute to settlers of the free state.

Above right: Maude Mitchell, ca. 1900

Above left: Mitchell on the first Fordson model tractor with fellow harvesters

The Wabaunsee County Historical Society would like to thank the lenders to this exhibition; exhibition organizers Michael Stubbs (board member), Liz Seaton (associate curator, Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art, Kansas State University), and Carol Cook; and others who assisted with exhibition production and publicity, including Dave Webb and Beach Museum of Art staff members Lindsay Smith, Luke Dempsey, and Sarah Price.



No. 2

CHECKLIST

Note: Dimensions refer to image size, height preceding width.

Maude J. Mitchell
(United States, 1875–1957)

1. *Gold of the West*, ca. 1932, oil on canvas, 15 ¾ x 19 ½ in., The First National Bank of Wamego
2. *Mitchell Home, 1879*, 1947, oil on board, 15 ½ x 19 ½ in., Marsha Reeves, Milpitas, CA
3. *The Crew*, ca. 1936, oil on board, 11 x 15 in., Betsy Andersen, Coronado, CA
4. *Wheat Harvest on the Mitchell Farm*, 1936, oil on board, 11 x 15 in., Karen Cox, Leawood, KS
5. *Gilbert's First Crop on Big 4*, ca. 1936, oil on board, 5 x 8 ½ in., Karen Cox, Leawood, KS
6. *Mount Mitchell*, 1930s, oil on board, 5 ½ x 7 ½ in., Wabaunsee County Historical Society, Alma, KS
7. *Butchering Time*, 1930s, oil on board, 7 ½ x 5 ½ in., Wabaunsee County Historical Society, Alma, KS
8. *When Winter Comes*, 1950s, oil on canvas 29 ½ x 22 ¼ in., Wamego Historical Society, Wamego, KS



Mitchell, ca. 1947, in her studio, a former hiding place for slaves seeking their freedom. (Wabaunsee County Historical Society Museum)

9. *Home Sweet Home*, ca. 1930, oil on board, 5 ½ x 7 ½ in., Donna and Robert Haynes Estate, Wamego, KS
10. *Giant Cottonwood*, ca. 1935, oil on board 5 ½ x 7 ½ in., Madge McDonald, Wamego, KS
11. *The Old Homestead*, ca. 1935, oil on board, 5 ½ x 7 ½ in., Donna and Robert Haynes Estate, Wamego, KS
12. *Twin Bridges*, ca. 1935, oil on board, 5 ½ x 7 ½ in., Madge McDonald, Wamego, KS
13. *Giant Elm*, ca. 1935, oil on board, 5 ½ x 7 ½ in., Madge McDonald, Wamego, KS
14. *Homeland*, ca. 1935, 5 ½ x 7 ½ in., oil on board, Wamego Historical Society, Wamego, KS
15. *Contentment*, ca. 1929, oil on board, 11 x 15 in., Karen Cox, Leawood, KS
16. *Contentment*, ca. 1929, oil on board, 5 ½ x 7 ½ in., John Mertz, Miami, FL
17. *The Bridge*, ca. 1944, oil on canvas, 31 ½ x 21 ½ in., Jim Mertz, Cheshire, CT
18. *Farmer's Play Day, Wamego City Park, July 4, 1932*, ca. 1932, oil on canvas, 19 ½ x 23 5/8 in., Jane Auerswald, Indio, CA
19. *Song of Field and Sky*, ca. 1933, nine oil sketches on board, 5 ½ x 7 ½ in. each; 30 x 36 in. framed, Joy McAfee, Northfield, MN
20. Title unknown (Kansas River), ca. 1953, oil on canvas, 15 ¾ x 19 ½ in., Jane Goeckler, Silver Lake, KS
21. *The Old Ranch Feed Lot*, 1940s, oil on board, 10 ¾ x 15 in., Donna and Robert Haynes Estate, Wamego, KS
22. *Harvest Scene, Big 4 Ranch*, ca. 1936, oil on board, 10 ¾ x 15 in., Kathryn Buster, Kansas City, MO
23. Study for *The Harvest Scene, Big 4 Ranch*, ca. 1936, oil on board, 5 ½ x 7 ½ in., John Mertz, Miami, FL
24. *Sunset Glory*, ca. 1930, oil on board, 7 ½ x 9 ½ in., Nancy Sommers, Dana Point, CA
25. *Buffalo Mound*, ca. 1930, oil on board 7 ½ x 9 ½ in., Kathryn Buster, Kansas City, MO
26. Title unknown (home in Louisville, Kansas), 1940s, oil on board, 10 ½ x 13 ½ in., Richard Mertz, Manhattan, KS
27. Title unknown (1951 Kansas River flood), ca. 1951, oil on board, 10 ½ x 13 ½ in., Sally Ubell, Dodge City, KS
28. Title unknown (hollyhocks and milk house on the Mitchell farmstead), 1950, oil on board, 11 ½ x 7 ½ in., Donna and Larry Berner, Wamego, KS
29. Title unknown (Horace Tabor house), 1950 Oil on board, 11 x 15 in., Jay Cook, Belvue, KS
30. *The Morgan Family*, 1940s, oil on board, 11 ¼ x 15 ½ in., Betsy Andersen, Coronado, CA



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31. *Gold of the West*, ca. 1932, oil on canvas, 49 x 63 in., Wabaunsee County Historical Society, Alma, KS
32. *The Invitation*, 1940s, oil on board, 7 ½ x 5 ½ in., Kathryn Buster, Kansas City, MO
33. *Red Shed*, 1930s, oil on board, 7 ½ x 9 ½ in., Kathryn Buster, Kansas City, MO
34. Mortar and pestle used by Mitchell to grind pigments.
35. Art portfolio, late 19th and early 20th century, 19 ½ x 25 in., Marsha Reeves (Milpitas, CA)
- 36-38. Sheet music, including *Riding in the Rain* (Nordyke Music Publishers, Hollywood, CA) and *Prairie Roads A-Windin'* (Syndicate Music Publishers, Hollywood, CA)
39. Title unknown, ca. 1930, wood, 7 x 7 in., Kathryn Buster, Kansas City, MO
40. *The Waste of Wild Game*, ca. 1900, reproduction of original pen and ink cartoon, 7 ½ x 10 in., Mitchell family scrapbook (Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka)



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