

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
___ prehistoric	___ archeology-prehistoric	___ community planning	___ landscape architecture	___ religion
___ 1400–1499	___ archeology-historic	___ conservation	___ law	___ science
___ 1500–1599	___ agriculture	___ economics	___ literature	xxx sculpture
___ 1600–1699	___ architecture	___ education	___ military	___ social/
___ 1700–1799	xx art	___ engineering	___ music	___ humanitarian
___ 1800–1899	___ commerce	___ exploration/settlement	___ philosophy	___ theater
xx 1900–	___ communications	___ industry	___ politics/government	___ transportation
		___ invention		___ other (specify)

Specific dates 1934–5 **Builder/Architect** Christian Petersen (Art)
Proudfoot, Rawson & Souers (Building)
Statement of Significance (in one paragraph) Criterion C&A, Art, Sculpture
Contributing Resource Count: 1

Petersen completed the bas relief as the only sculptor in the Public Works of Art project in Iowa City in 1934, directed by Iowa painter Grant Wood. The project artists completed murals for Iowa public buildings, among them a series of murals for the Iowa State College library.*

The sculptures are regarded as "significant artistic statements on agriculture, technology, and higher education in mid-1930s America" by Patricia L. Bliss and Lynette Pohlman. #

Ms. Pohlman is director of the Brunnier Museum and Gallery at ISU. Ms. Bliss is author of a biography, Christian Petersen Remembered, published in the fall of 1986 by the Iowa State University Press in Ames.

The biography narrates the Iowa career of Christian Petersen, who was born in Denmark in 1885, emigrated to the United States with his family in 1894, and became a designer and diecutter for the commemorative medallion industry in Massachusetts until early 1929, when he moved to Chicago to pursue a full-time sculpture career.

Petersen was appointed to Grant Wood's federal art workshop in Iowa City in 1934 as a result of efforts by Raymond M. Hughes, president of Iowa State, and Edgar R. Harlan, director of the historic, memorial, and art department for the state of Iowa. Hughes and Harlan enlisted the support of Des Moines newspapermen who recommended Petersen to Wood. Among them were editorial cartoonist Jay N. ("Ding") Darling and columnist Harlan Miller, of the Des Moines Register.

The Dairy Industry sculptures were the first landmark works of Petersen's 21-year career as artist-in-residence at Iowa State. He became the only resident artist serving such a long career in the history of American art on college campuses. The only American sculptor-in-residence for over two decades at a publicly-supported college, Petersen retired from a full schedule of teaching and sculpturing in 1955, after completing a series of ten major outdoor landmark sculptures, fifteen studio pieces or interior building sculptures, and at least twenty-three portrait busts or plaques of faculty and staff. His last major work of 300 career sculptures was "A Dedication to the Future" a major bronze sculpture commissioned for the Fisher Community Center in Marshalltown, Iowa, completed just before Petersen died in 1961.

THE CONTEXT OF THE DAIRY SCULPTURES IN RELATION TO CHRISTIAN PETERSEN'S IOWA SCULPTURE CAREER

Regional American art of the 1930s

Petersen came to Chicago in early 1929, hoping to become a midwestern sculptor in an emerging regional American art movement led by painters Grant Wood of Iowa, John Stuart Curry of Kansas, and Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri. He was determined to bring sculptural art into the daily lives of midwestern Americans and away from the trendsetting influence of East Coast galleries and critics.

*the basis for the Criterion A association, sculpture.

#the basis for the Criterion C association, art.

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Midwestern themes and setting of Petersen's works

Petersen's career as an Iowa sculptor reflected the agricultural setting of the midwest and educational mandate of Iowa State College, a land-grant institution. He portrayed agricultural subjects--veterinary science, dairying, animal husbandry--and the original Americans of the midwest, the Osage and Mesquakie Indians. Relating his subject matter to mid-America, the sculptor created studio pieces and portraits of prairie pioneers, immigrants, sharecroppers, farmers, a cornhusker, victims of flood and drought, prize horses and cattle, and his most famous work, "The Gentle Doctor", a heroic statue of a veterinarian.

He concentrated on sculptures related to his life as an Iowan: portraits and studio pieces of ministers, saints, athletes, governors, presidents, educators, civic leaders and philanthropists, soldiers, and the beloved children of his midwestern world.

All of Petersen's best works were created in Iowa. Although most are owned by private collectors, notable studio pieces, portraits, and commissioned sculptures are publicly accessible in Ames, Marshalltown, Dubuque, Dyersville, Cedar Rapids, Mason City, Sioux City, Ventura, and Des Moines.

NOTEWORTHINESS OF THE DAIRY SCULPTURES

A departure from traditional classic American sculpture, the Dairy Industry courtyard and interior sculptures represent Christian Petersen's beginning career in Iowa and the first federally subsidized art programs of the Depression era, which began a series of programs which were halted by the onset of World War II.

The concept of art in public buildings originated with the Greeks and Romans. In America of the 1930s, Petersen's dairy sculptures for a midwestern college campus were a rarity among federally sponsored art, most of which was murals, easel painting, and handcrafts. Sculpture projects were confined to large cities and concentrated on both seacoasts. The Iowa Public Works of Art Project in Iowa City led Christian Petersen to the dairy sculpture project and then to a long and productive career as artist-in-residence at Iowa State College.

Emma Lila Fundabirk and Thomas G. Davenport, in a comprehensive book titled Art in Public Places in the United States, noted that Iowa State University in 1976 was "primary among those schools which have made efforts to place art on their campuses", ranking Iowa State with Princeton, the University of California, University of Texas, California State College at Long Beach, and the University of Houston. Fundabirk and co-author Mary Douglas Foreman, in Visual Arts in the United States, noted: "Iowa State University has long been known for the many sculptures by Christian Petersen which were created for that campus in the 1930s and 1940s." In another 600-page comprehensive compilation titled Art at Educational Institutions in the United States, Fundabirk and Davenport included photographs and listings of six major Iowa State University sculptures by Christian Petersen, beginning with the Dairy Industry courtyard and interior bas reliefs.

In his first campus lecture to the faculty at a convocation in 1935, Christian Petersen explained why he came to the midwest and asked for help from his colleagues:

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Create an American art, here in the rich soil of
the midwest, where America has its roots. Here
shall the the soil and the seed and the strength
of art.

Forseeing an emerging of a genuine American art uninfluenced by European
trends, he concludes his lecture with these words:

For it is you who make your artists, and through
them, you shall be remembered.

The Dairy Industries Building was designed by the Architectural firm of
Proudfoot, Rawson and Souers, of Des Moines. J. and W. A. Elliott Construction
built the building in the years 1927-28.