



Tennessee *Harvest*

1870s–1920s

This exhibition shows connections between paintings made in Tennessee and artworks featured in *Farm to Table: Art, Food, and Identity in the Age of Impressionism*. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a time of significant growth and development for the arts in Tennessee. Although new schools, art societies, and galleries were opening in cities like Nashville and Knoxville, artists frequently left the state for cities like New York, Munich, and Paris to study at professional academies and see examples of academic art as well as newer trends like Impressionism. Many returned home to become leading cultural figures in their communities.

A direct connection to French painting is seen in works by George W. Chambers, Willie Betty Newman, and Lloyd Branson. Chambers studied at Paris's Académie Julian with Julien Dupré, an artist associated with the Barbizon School, a group of painters who depicted fields, farm laborers, and forests in the countryside south of Paris. We can see a connection between Dupré's 1884 *Haying Scene* in the exhibition *Farm to Table*, showing a peasant woman working the fields, with Chambers's painting *In the Tennessee Mountains*, depicting an aged woman standing in a cabbage patch that she has wrangled into productivity (cover). Although Branson did not study in France, he traveled through the country, where he saw the works of French Realists and Barbizon School painters, which influenced his extraordinary painting *Women at Work* (fig. 1).

Unlike *In the Tennessee Mountains* and *Women at Work*, Newman's *The Frugal Repast* was not painted in Tennessee but rather in France, where she lived in the late nineteenth century



Figure 1



Figure 2

before returning to Nashville in 1901 (fig. 2). She also attended the Académie Julian, working with William-Adolphe Bouguereau, who was famous not only for his highly polished allegories based on mythological themes but also for empathetic depictions of people living in poverty. For her part, Newman specialized in symbolic peasant pictures during her time in France. This work shows a young peasant girl pausing in her meager meal to make eye contact with us, soliciting pity for herself and for all deprived children in a visual counterpart to the pathos found in novels by Charles Dickens and Victor Hugo.

Such imagery had been popular in France since the early 1800s, when an interest in folk culture and rural life was gaining momentum among artists. Since the Middle Ages, there had been a popular stereotype of peasants as subhuman—violent, brutish, and ineducable. Countering this by the nineteenth century was a rising empathy for the rural poor born of the communal impulses of the French Revolution, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s philosophy of the natural man, and Karl Marx’s insistence on the rights of the working class. This sentiment aligned with socially minded artists—Gustave Courbet, Camille Pissarro, Jean-François Millet, and others—whose works underscored the humanity of the working class.

Is there an American equivalent of the peasant? In both *In the Tennessee Mountains* and *Women at Work*, the artists imagine the answer to be embodied in white female farmworkers. Both paintings idealize farming as a nurturing communion with nature—one showing the seasonal triumph of a mountain woman, the other a group of robust young women working cooperatively and joyfully as they bring in the apple crop. These



Figure 3

images echo the ideology of Agrarianism, which held that, as literary scholar M. Thomas Inge wrote, “the life of the farmer is harmonious, orderly, and whole, and it counteracts the tendencies toward abstraction, fragmentation, and alienation that have come with modern urban experience.”¹ Inge was writing about a 1920s group of Nashville poets and writers called the Fugitives, later renamed the Agrarians. Their view was that the South’s agricultural history could serve as a model for resisting the industrialization and urbanization occurring throughout the region in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which they felt to be dehumanizing. Although they did not acknowledge the role of slavery in sustaining the region’s agrarian identity, in proposing society was losing contact with the natural world, the Fugitives were not far from the philosophy that helped give rise to the European peasant picture.²

The energetic brushwork and luminous atmospheres in farm scenes by William Gilbert Gaul evoke the Barbizon style and underscore his tendency to romanticize the Southern pastorate. Although he was from New Jersey, Gaul’s mother was a Southerner; he divided his time between New York, where he had studied at the National Academy, and Tennessee, where he lived for a time in Van Buren County on property he inherited near Fall Creek Falls. In this exhibition, his farm in Van Buren is shown bursting with warmth and sentimentality, a tribute to the agrarian South (fig. 3).

While the Agrarians put forth the notion that, through agriculture, fundamental physical and spiritual needs can be met, they were less concerned with the often-harsh realities



Figure 4

experienced by family farmers, sharecroppers, and other agricultural workers, both Black and white. It is worth noting that paintings in this exhibition do not reflect the prominent role of Black people in Tennessee's food production. There is a substantial photographic record of the centrality of African Americans from farm to table, and a slideshow accompanying the exhibition presents a more balanced picture of the period.

If not directly reflecting Agrarian nostalgia, the still lifes on view counter visions of rural charm and abundance with depictions of humble fare that many working-class Tennesseans might grow or bring home from the market. These works imply sympathy for those who eat to live rather than live to eat. Cornelius Hankins's austere *Still Life with Potatoes*, with its array of lumpy and dimpled potatoes spilling from heavy pans, depicts a staple that an American "peasant," if such a term applies, would have relied on for sustenance.

Realism like Hankins's was the predominant style in Tennessee until the end of the nineteenth century. While Gaul's painterly approach signals a familiarity with Impressionism, the style is fully in evidence in Catherine Wiley's *Morning Milking Time* (ca. 1915) and Willie Betty Newman's *Still Life with Apple and Green Goblet* (fig. 4), which feature the visible brushwork and shimmering light typical of Impressionist painting. Wiley has captured a fleeting moment in the life of a dairy farmer known to us only as Mr. Kelleher—with bucket in one hand, jacket in the other, he is on his way to milk the cows. With its vibrant immediacy, Willie Betty Newman's still life conveys a significant stylistic

change from earlier work like *The Frugal Repast*, showing her putting her direct knowledge of Impressionism to good use, even if the style was well past its prime in France by the early twentieth century.

With their absorption of European influences, these artists prefigure the next phase in the region's paintings, as was seen in the modernist works on view in the Mint Museum and Georgia Museum of Art's *Southern/Modern* shown at the Frist in 2024. That exhibition included Southern artists working in styles such as Expressionism, Surrealism, and abstraction. Like their predecessors, many left the South for better opportunities and never came back. Others stayed or returned, becoming cultural ambassadors and forces of change in their communities.

Mark Scala, Chief Curator, Frist Art Museum

With Co-Curator Candice Candeto, Senior Curator of Fine and Decorative Art, Tennessee State Museum

Notes

1. M. Thomas Inge, "Agrarianism in Literature," in *The Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, v. 3, Literature and Recreation, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris (Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1989), 13.

2. There is a dark side to this version of agrarianism, an attitude held by Fugitive writers like Donald Davidson who, in the words of historian Paul V. Murphy, "defended segregation as a social institution developed by white southerners to preserve their culture and identity."

Paul V. Murphy, "Donald Davidson," in *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, online ed. 3.0 (University of Tennessee Press, 2017), <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/donald-davidson/>.

Illustrations

Cover: George W. Chambers. *In the Tennessee Mountains*, 1887. Oil on canvas; 47 x 63 x 2 in. Courtesy of Tennessee State Museum

Fig. 1: Lloyd Branson. *Women at Work*, 1891. Oil on canvas; 29 x 49 1/2 in. Courtesy Calvin M. McClung Historical Collection

Fig. 2: Willie Betty Newman. *The Frugal Repast*, ca. 1895. Oil on canvas; 42 1/4 x 28 in. Cheekwood Estate and Gardens, Museum purchase through the bequest of Anita Bevill McMichael Stallworth, 1990.3. Photo © Jerry Atnip, Cheekwood Estate and Gardens

Fig. 3: William Gilbert Gaul. *Van Buren, Tennessee*, ca. 1891–95. Oil on canvas; 29 5/8 x 44 in. The Johnson Collection, Spartanburg, SC

Fig. 4: Willie Betty Newman. *Still Life with Apple and Green Goblet*, date unknown. Oil on canvas; 15 1/4 x 17 1/4 in. Private collection

January 31–May 4, 2025

Organized by the Frist Art Museum and co-curated by Mark Scala, Frist Art Museum chief curator, and Candice Candeto, Tennessee State Museum senior curator of fine and decorative art

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