

Ernest Hüpeden: The Painted Forest

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When Ernest Hüpeden (c. 1850–1911) arrived in the United States from Germany, he already had a storied past. Few records exist to chronicle his life, yet he is still the subject of considerable folk history in southwestern Wisconsin. Hüpeden worked all over the United States as an itinerant painter, carrying paints, stacks of white paperboard, and piles of magazine images from which he painted pictures in exchange for room and board. A job in Valton, Wisconsin, was his masterwork: a series of murals now known as “The Painted Forest” created in the lodge of the Modern Woodmen of America.

Hüpeden claimed to have left a wife and child in Germany after being imprisoned for eight years for a crime he did not commit. Finally cleared of charges when the real perpetrator gave a deathbed confession, Hüpeden’s reputation was nonetheless tarnished and he and his wife became estranged. On October 10, 1878, he set sail on *The Herder*, traveling from Hamburg to New York City.

In prison, Hüpeden had received his first box of paints and brushes from a visitor, a gift that would carry him far. Arriving in America, he roamed the country as an itinerant artist. Like many immigrants, Hüpeden sought a familiar landscape settled by his fellow countrymen. He arrived in Wisconsin and spent time in Baraboo, Cazenovia, Hillsboro, Hub City, Ironton, LaFarge, LaValle, Platteville, West Lima, and Yuba before arriving in Valton. There, in 1899, the Modern Woodmen of America (the town’s fraternal organization) were looking for a painter to decorate the stage curtain at their new lodge: Camp 6190. Hüpeden depicted a contemporary American victory: the 1898 battle of Manila Bay, in which the United States Navy defeated the Spanish flotilla. He embellished the scene by painting an elegant set of drawn proscenium curtains, as though the battle itself were a play on the grand stage. The brotherhood was thrilled with the painted curtain, signed and dated December 20, 1899, and invited Hüpeden to paint the interior of the entire lodge.

His plan was to visually situate the lodge itself within the region’s landscape: a painted pine forest populated by allegorical figures illustrating the rites and themes of the organization. He spent the next two years on the project, painting every inch of the lodge’s 60-by-33-foot space and its 24-foot ceiling with symbolic references to the Woodmen. He continued his mural imagery on the window shades as well, so that when pulled, the painted narrative continued uninterrupted throughout the entire interior; when raised, the exterior view fulfilled a similar role (the shades did not survive the years and solid green shades now exist in their place). Hüpeden’s visual manipulation was highly effective; to visit the site was—and is—an experience in immersion.

Intermingled with his painted forest are various rituals that metaphorically convey the safety and security offered by the brotherhood. Despite their name, the MWA was not an organization of woodmen per se. Rather, like Freemasons who likened their work to that of an almighty architect, the MWA adopted a symbolic name that likened their goals to those of foresters. Like many fraternal insurance societies organized in nineteenth-century America, the primary goal of the MWA was to insure and protect American workers and their families. Hüpeden’s murals detail these goals. On the south wall, to the right of the stage, the story begins with a “death ceremony,” on which the MWA placed particular emphasis. An excerpt from the group’s *Official Ritual* reads:

I am death! Relentless and unsparing! I visit the cradle and take the smallest of humanity, leaving the mother to wail and mourn. The strongest of men are crushed beneath my hand. Neither the Palace nor the hovel are free from my hand. Fortune has no exemption from my mandate, nor does fame stay my coming! I strike where I like, when I please, and whom I desire.

Hüpeden's "death" scene depicts a strange initiation rite wherein an alarmed and injured novice takes a harrowing nighttime ride on a wild goat; he heads uncontrollably toward the untamed depths of forest where danger and death reign. An owl perches in a dead tree; human skeletal remains lie at its base.

Moving westward on the wall, the pine forest appears dark and dense and soon the terrified novice—along with an unkempt vagabond who has come onto the scene—are accosted by hooded hellions. Their lair is a place in the forest where uncultivated nature is a frightening place, where hillsides are littered with fallen and dead trees. Opposite this scene, on the eastern wall, Hüpeden depicts a world where woodmen have cared for the forest and where nature is tamed. Stumps are intermingled with flowers and soft grass, a woman cares for her home and family, and a team of uniformed MWA members team keep peril at bay. On the northern end of the west wall, an axe-bearing band of brothers rescues the novice and the vagabond before they meet an unfortunate death, and a robed elder points toward a castle fortress atop the hill. The Germanic castle, with the sun setting behind it, represents the lodge of the MWA and features flags that read: "M.W. of A. Valton Camp N. # 6190," and "Peace, Light, Safety." A final scene depicts the town of Valton as imagined one hundred years into the future. In Hüpeden's Valton of 1999, landmarks bearing the names of 1899 merchants are proudly represented, suggesting their longevity into a successful future. A Modern Woodmen widow stands at the bank collecting the \$2,000.00 benefit that the organization was proud to offer. Hüpeden painted other murals for local homes in the area, as well as on barns and fences, on interior kitchen walls, on pieces of furniture and other household items, and even on bottles and pie pans. On December 8, 1911, a local man named Webster Leatherberry found the artist's frozen body huddled under a piece of painter's canvas in the buggy shed of his farm. Hüpeden was buried in a pauper's grave.

The MWA Lodge remained a public building until the 1960s, when it was privately purchased. Unfortunately, the years had taken a toll on the ceiling murals and they had deteriorated beyond repair. They are believed to have included a glorious sunset and an electrical storm, showing the powerful range of nature's forces. In the 1980s, the building was purchased by the Kohler Foundation and a restoration of the lodge and the murals took place. The preserved building was given to Sauk County and the Historical Society of the Upper Baraboo Valley, and opened to the public along with a display of ritual artifacts donated by the MWA. In 2004 the Kohler Foundation regained stewardship of the Painted Forest, built an additional art studio and study center, and gifted the site to Edgewood College of Madison, Wisconsin.

Of the few examples of Hüpeden's work in a public collection, a large cabinet with six painted panels once owned by Donna and Michael Bauernfeind is now part of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center collection. The panels are representative of the composition and representational style Hüpeden pursued in the Painted Forest, and their imagery may pertain to biographical aspects of the original owners.

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Portions of this essay are excerpted from:
Sublime Spaces & Visionary Worlds:
Built Environments of Vernacular Artists
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