

IN THE FIELD

May
June
1999

The Field Museum's Membership Publication



The Art of Being Kuna

May 1 to July 25

Rediscovering a Master Muralist

From the President



JOHN WEINSTEIN / GNB8119.6

NSF: THE FIELD MUSEUM'S SILENT PARTNER

The National Science Foundation (NSF), an independent government agency that funds scientific research in the United States, will celebrate its 50th birthday in 2000.

Often called "America's investment in the future," NSF was established by President Truman "to promote the progress of science; to advance the national health, prosperity and welfare; to secure the national defense; and for other purposes." And it has done just that by investing \$3.3 billion of taxpayers' money each year in 20,000 research and educational projects at museums, research centers, universities and schools across the nation. In addition, NSF-backed scientists have chalked up a remarkable 100 Nobel Prizes over the past 50 years.

The country's return on its investment has been phenomenal — from the discovery by NSF-supported scientists of how

bacteria develop and retain resistance to antibiotics, to the design of the computer framework that evolved into the Internet.

NSF and taxpayers also have received a remarkable return on their investment at The Field Museum, which has received \$16 million from the agency since 1990. Following its inception, NSF has supported hundreds of research projects in the Museum's geology, botany, anthropology and zoology departments. These NSF-supported projects have probed everything from the role El Niño plays in the evolution of desert plant communities in Peru to the rise of "modern" precolonial cities and societies on the Swahili Coast of East Africa. Currently, NSF is supporting 15 research projects at the Museum, including zoological studies in South America and geochemical analyses of meteorites in Chicago.

The Museum also has used NSF grants to maintain and improve its research collections — the scientific athenaeum in which our curators have found answers to the world's most complex biological and cultural mysteries. For example, with NSF's support we have created computerized inventories of many of our zoological collections and thereby increased their utility to others. Similarly, the anthropology department is using NSF funds to recatalog and computerize its collection of Anasazi and Mogollon artifacts. When completed, this project will enable researchers to paint a more complete picture of these two early Native American cultures.

Additionally, we have relied on NSF funds over the years to hire

and train graduate students to work alongside our curators in the field, and we have turned to NSF for assistance in developing programs designed to train undergraduate women and minorities in collections-based research. The main goals of this program are to encourage undergraduates to pursue careers in the biological sciences and to prepare them for service in the name of science.

During the 1990s, we also received more than \$4 million from NSF that has helped us create a host of new exhibits, including **Pacific** (1990), **Animal Kingdom** (1991), **Africa** (1993) and **Life Over Time** (1994). More recently, NSF provided \$1.6 million toward the funding of **Underground Adventure**, a new permanent exhibit that explores the complex world of soil ecosystems. Not only do we rely on NSF support to create these exhibits, but also to design educational outreach programs to carry their scientific and cultural message to school children throughout the Chicago area.

In all, NSF has been an invaluable partner in our constant drive to understand the biological and human world. Moreover, I believe that this nation would not be the technological and economic powerhouse it is today if it were not for NSF's half century of service.

NSF, we thank you for all the years you have supported our programs and we look forward to celebrating your next milestone in 2050.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John W. McCarter Jr." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

John W. McCarter Jr.
President & CEO

A Reminder For Members' Nights

Don't forget that tickets are required to attend Members' Nights, May 6 and May 7. Please mail in your reservation forms today. For more information, call 312.922.9410, ext.453.

2

Art critics in 1940 hailed **Julius Moessel's Museum murals** as masterpieces. Seventeen years later, Moessel died broke and forgotten.



"The Art of Being Kuna" exhibit explores the culture of the Kuna people through their vibrant artwork. See **Calendar Section** for details.

8

Q&A with Wilma Mankiller, former principal chief of the Cherokee Nation.



For almost a year, a team of musicians and exhibit developers have been sampling sounds from artifacts for the exhibit "Sounds from the Vaults."

10

A delegation from U.S. museums encounters **the riches of Tunisia's past and present** in a land that has always looked outward to the limits of the known world.

11

Altamira Press releases a new book detailing **excavations by a Field Museum archaeologist in Peru's Nazca Valley** in 1926.



Within this meteorite are billions of diamonds that arrived on Earth after traveling millions of miles through the darkness of interstellar space.

Your Guide to the Field

A complete schedule of events for May/June, including programs offered in conjunction with the **Underground Adventure** exhibit.

Around Campus

Shedd Aquarium

Clyde Roper, a scientist at the Smithsonian Institution, recently completed an expedition to find and photograph the elusive giant squids that inhabit the mile-deep Kaikoura Canyon near New Zealand. During **Oceans Day** on June 8, 1999, at 7 p.m., Roper will reveal whether his search for these mysterious, 60-foot-long denizens of the deep ocean was successful. Roper's talk and video

presentation will be followed by an informal reception. Admission is \$12 for the general public; \$10 for Shedd Aquarium members. Call 312.692.3333 for more information and to register.

Adler Planetarium

Celebrate the arrival of warm days and starry summer nights at **Summer Solstice Sunfest** on Saturday, June 19, 1999, from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. During the day, visitors will have a chance to

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This issue's cover photograph is by Mari Lyn Salvador of a Kuna woman dressed in a traditional mola.

The **Field**
Museum

The Field Museum salutes the people of Chicago for their long-standing, generous support of the Museum through the Chicago Park District.

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view the surface of the Sun through a telescope on the Adler's new Telescope Terrace. They also can partake in Sun-related demonstrations and attend discussions highlighting recent discoveries about the Sun in the Adler's Dynamic Universe Demonstration Theater. Other activities include craft-making in the new Solar System exhibit gallery and storytelling in the Milky Way Galaxy exhibit. Please call 312.322.0304 for more information.

Rediscovering Julius Moessel

Chicago and The Field Museum's Master Muralist



Above: "A Wholesale Vegetable Market," 1939 — one of the 18 murals by Julius Moessel that hang in the **Plants of the World** exhibit on the second floor of The Field Museum. All of the murals in this series, titled "The Story of Food Plants," can be viewed on the Museum's Web site at www.fmnh.org/candr/ecp/Moessel/moessel_home.htm. In addition, most of Moessel's known German architectural works and some of his easel paintings are reproduced in Judith Breuer's book *Julius Mössel: Dekorationen — und Kunstmaler* (Konrad Theiss Verlag, 1995).

By Mark Alvey

Administrative Coordinator, Academic Affairs

There is a story waiting to be told in the **Plants of the World** exhibit on the second floor of the Museum. It is not a botanical story — although there are dozens of those there, too, from the search for a cure for AIDS to the ritual uses of hallucinogenic fungi. Rather, this tale is one of pigment and canvas, artistic passion and faded celebrity. And it is not recounted in the hall's display cases, but above them. The 18 murals that hang in the main east-west corridor of the plant hall represent the climax of a long-forgotten drama, marking the final chapter in the story of their painter, Julius Moessel — a German émigré who died broke and largely overlooked.

Dating from 1938 to 1940, Moessel's mural series, titled "The Story of Food Plants," illustrates humankind's use of plants as food, from early man as a hunter-gatherer to an urban produce market in 20th-century America. Supported by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) — a New Deal agency created to employ people on public-works projects during the Depression — the 7-foot-by-9-foot canvases are variously colorful and muted, and largely realistic, although many exhibit a certain playfulness. The head of the agency's Chicago office called the series "a high watermark in WPA art achievement" and the art critic at *The Chicago Tribune* hailed it as one of the "imperative 'not-to-be-missed' affairs, of which each season offers us a few." But "The Story of Food Plants" was the last major commission for Moessel, whom critics in the 1930s and 1940s regarded as one of Chicago's most important artists.

The Chicago years really constituted a second career for Moessel. Born in 1871 in Fürth, Germany, Moessel studied at the Munich Academy, established his own architectural decoration firm while still in his 20s and by the early 1900s had become one of Germany's most important and sought-after architectural painters. He decorated several theaters in collaboration with architect Max Littman, including the Württembergischen Court Theater in Stuttgart and the Schiller Theater in Berlin. His other commissions included the city hall at Leipzig, the Munich Stock Exchange, the Jury Room in Nuremberg's Central Justice Building (site of the war trials) and the Palazzo Borghese in Rome, as well as several churches, cafés and private homes.

As large-scale commissions began to dry up amid the economic decline of post-World War I Germany, Moessel decided to make a dramatic change. In 1926, he left home one morning as if to go to his office like any other day and boarded a ship bound for New York, sending his wife word of his intentions from the ship. Moessel, who later remarried in the United States, claimed to have immigrated to Chicago at the invitation of Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears, Roebuck and Co., to decorate the philanthropist's planned Museum of Science and Industry. The



PETER T. FLURST

Above: "The Devil's Galaxy," circa 1940, oil on canvas, 4 feet by 3 feet, in a private collection in the United States. Although Moessel aligned himself with no "school" or movement, local art critics often described his more otherworldly works as surreal.

Rosenwald commission never came to pass, but Moessel remained in the United States, taking on decorative projects in Chicago and St. Louis before finally moving to Chicago in 1929. Moessel also may have decorated some buildings in Detroit in collaboration with industrial architect Albert Kahn, but the historical evidence on this is sketchy. Among Moessel's known architectural works from his early days in the United States are the Stop-and-Shop store on Washington and State in Chicago and the ceiling of the foyer of the Hotel Jefferson in St. Louis, both of which have been lost to demolition and remodeling, respectively.

By the time he settled in Chicago, Moessel had rebuilt his business and his fortune — only to see both wiped out in the stock market crash of 1929. In financial ruin and with the Depression all but eliminating the market for murals and architectural commissions, Moessel, now nearly 60, added easel painting to his repertoire to support himself. Despite having no experience and no training as an easel painter, Moessel was exhibiting both smaller and wall-sized canvases regularly in Chicago by 1932. If economic necessity prompted the shift from grand ceilings to smaller works, the move also marked an advance in the artist's style, which during the German years was very much in line with late 19th-century architectural decoration — intricate, ornate and often grotesque. His Chicago easel paintings suggest that Moessel, possibly freed from the constraints of collaboration with architects, gave his imagination free rein.

Perhaps due as much to his unique and eclectic artistic vision as to market imperatives, Moessel's smaller paintings were extremely diverse in subject and style. He became well known for decorative paintings of exotic birds and tropical animals, as well as hallucinatory religious paintings and nightmarish fantasies reminiscent of Hieronymous Bosch and Max Ernst. (He told friends in Chicago, perhaps with tongue in cheek, that he was the reincarnation of Bosch.) To pay the rent, he also executed comparatively staid landscapes à la Grant Wood. But these wide variations in style didn't seem to affect his standing in the Chicago art world. He exhibited his easel paintings, as well as his murals, at the Chicago Galleries Association, the Art Institute of Chicago and the All-Illinois Society of Fine Arts, and mounted many one-man shows at small galleries.

During the mid-1930s, the Chicago press frequently and effusively reviewed Moessel's work. Eleanor Jewett of the *Tribune* and Clarence Bulliet of the *Daily News* and *Art Digest* were Chicago's most powerful critics from the 1930s through the early 1950s. Although they were fierce opponents on most things artistic, both critics were nothing short of fans of Moessel for more than 20 years. In 1935, Bulliet placed Moessel "among the living masters of the world" and in a 1947 review declared that "Max Ernst and Salvador Dali might sit profitably at his feet for a few hours to learn the secret of the awe and wonder" that Moessel brought to his work. Likewise, by the mid-1930s, Jewett had declared Moessel a genius, "one of our outstanding painters" and the praise continued through the mid-1950s. Both critics also were in accord in repeatedly ranking Moessel as the city's most powerful muralist. In addition, Moessel's colleagues in the Chicago art world, such as Carl Hoeckner and Louis Grell, also respected him as an artist of great talent and accomplishment.

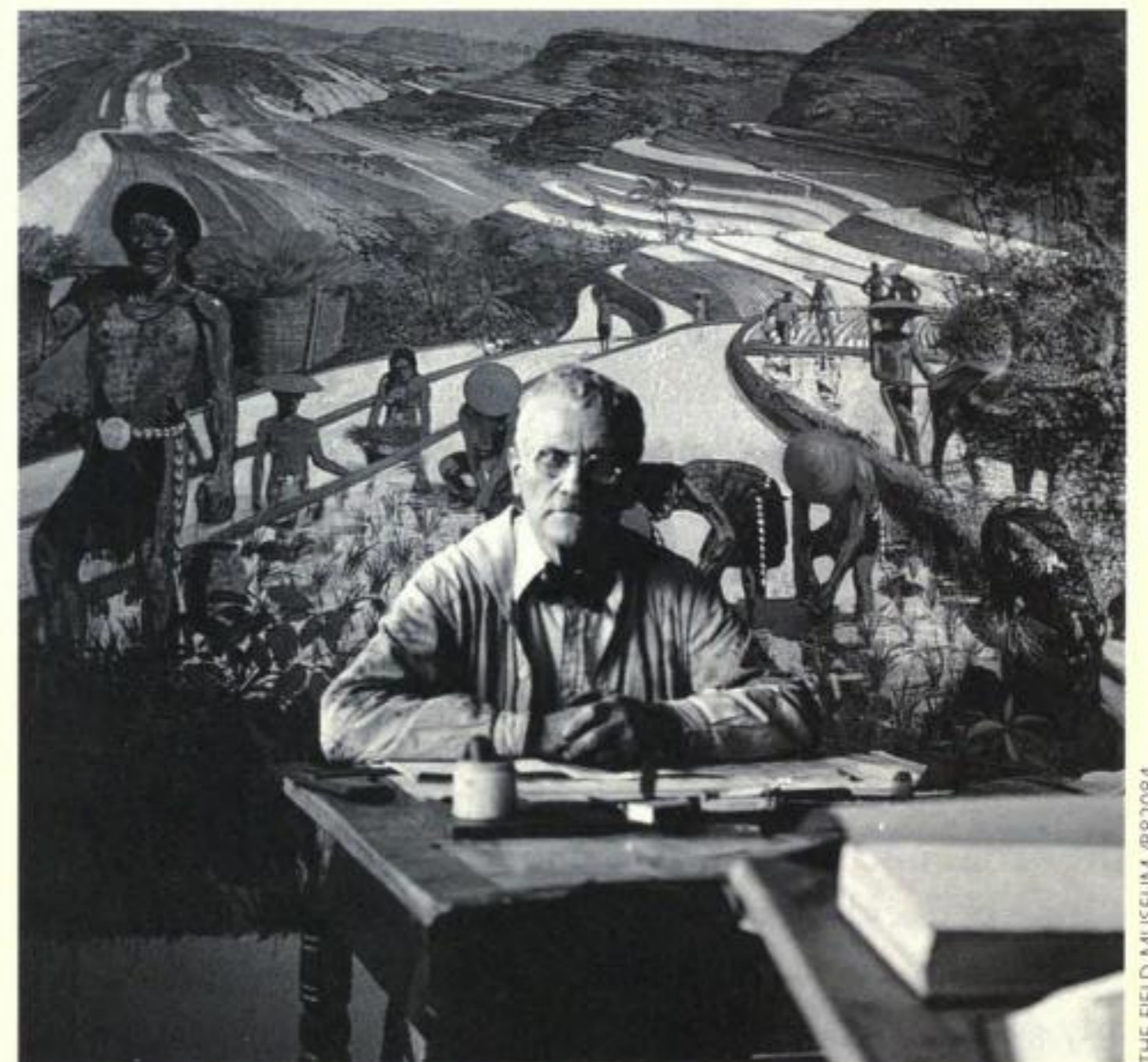
By virtue of his versatility and sheer perseverance, Moessel supported himself with his painting during the Depression, but he was dealt one more round of bad luck in the mid-1930s when he began to lose his eyesight. Whatever financial stability the artist had regained was shattered. Although surgery restored his vision, the medical expenses nearly wiped him out. The Field Museum commission, a large-scale project the likes of which Moessel had not seen in some time, must have come as a welcome proposal.

It is not clear exactly how Moessel, now 66, came by the commission, but from the Museum's perspective the decision must have been simple, given the artist's track record in Germany and his local reputation. The Museum envisioned the murals as an illustrative adjunct to the botany displays in what was then known as Hall 25, the Hall of Food Plants. The general thrust of the series was the various aspects of the economic and social dimensions of food plants showing, as the 1938 *Field Museum Annual Report* put it, "the primitive gathering, hoeing and planting, plow-

ing, sowing, and other steps in development of crop production; processes connected with the preparation of staple vegetable foods such as threshing, milling and baking, sugar production and wine-making; and transportation, trade, and distribution."

Initially, the commission called for 13 murals, but the series grew to 18 in the ensuing years. How much the Museum paid Moessel is uncertain, although in an early letter to Bror Dahlgren, chief curator of botany and the project supervisor, the artist proposed to paint the 13 murals for \$15,000, noting they "would of course cost in normal times \$75–100,000." Whatever the final sum agreed upon, Moessel began painting in April 1938. By the fall of the following year he had completed 14 murals, spending an average of 34 days on each.

Given the scientific nature of the project, Moessel checked his surrealistic impulses and pursued a more realistic style. At pains for accuracy — no doubt at Dahlgren's behest — the artist conducted intensive research on each of his subjects, studying artifacts from the anthropology collections and consulting ethnographic photos. In such a collaboration of art and science, however, some tension is inevitable. In this case, the friction arose in 1938 during the painting of one of the very first murals "Mexican Market Scene." For reasons now forgotten, Moessel became rankled with the Museum powers and illustrated his contempt by painting a dog urinating on a fiber basket in the center of the painting. Museum staff reportedly raised eyebrows but said nothing, and in a day or two, when his ire had subsided, Moessel lowered the dog's leg. The small file of correspondence in the Museum archives hints at the nature of some of the disagree-



Above: Moessel at work in front of the mural "Rice Growing, Philippines," 1938. One of Moessel's friends describes the artist as a "little fellow" who was as "sharp as could be" and who loved to tell stories of playing skat with composer Richard Strauss.

ments between the artist and botanist. In one letter to Dahlgren, for example, Moessel declares, “Regarding the corn picture I have no feeling for any change. I think it is good.” But the major bone of contention, and the one that best illustrates the artist’s prickliness, was financial. In February 1940, with four murals to go, Moessel stopped working.

“Sure I like to finish my work,” he wrote to Dahlgren, “but I would never work as an hourly paid worker. The Museum has to realize finally too, that I am not an eternal W.P.A. worker. . . . But I could be induced to work for a reasonable compensation, if the Museum begins right now with the most possible propaganda for my work.”

After a four-month impasse, Museum Director Clifford Gregg resolved the dispute by agreeing to pay Moessel \$500 to finish the four murals, which the artist did in July 1940. When the Museum unveiled them in September, the *Tribune’s* Jewett, as noted earlier, termed the series a “must” show, a “not-to-be missed” event and went on to call Moessel’s Field Museum commission “a just acknowledgement of his merit.” Bulliet’s *Daily News* review termed the murals “far and away his most important public work since he came to America.”

“The Story of Food Plants” was Moessel’s last major commission; he essentially stopped executing large-scale works by the mid-1940s. Upon completion of the murals, Moessel wrote to Dahlgren of his intention to travel to New York “looking for business” and asked the botanist for a reference at the American Museum. It is doubtful that the trip yielded any work. He also had sent feelers back to Germany in the late 1930s, but no offers materialized. In the early 1940s, he tried to convince Dahlgren to commission a new mural project or to purchase some of his existing murals, but none of these queries ever came to fruition. Moessel continued to paint smaller canvases and continued to exhibit his work as late as 1955 — to the enduring praise of Bulliet and Jewett. But as new trends like abstract expressionism eclipsed his eclectic style, Moessel saw his market and his fortunes decline. Yet, his temperament never faltered: He railed in interviews against modernism and the “neurasthenics” and “dilettantes” who supported it, and penned essays with such titles as “Concerning the Decay of Art.”

Moessel’s last years were difficult. He struggled financially and, as sales dwindled, painted increasingly for himself and his friends, often dashing off paintings as gifts. He died on Aug. 13, 1957, at age 85. A few days later, Moessel’s widow scattered his ashes over the lagoon in Jackson Park, near their Chicago home.

Moessel is still remembered fondly by friends from the Chicago days, although he is largely unknown to critics and historians of Chicago art. However, history may eventually give the artist his due. In the past few years, historians of German art and architecture have begun to rediscover Moessel’s architectural work, much of which was destroyed during World War II.



Above: “Indians Gathering Pods of the Cow-Lily, Klamath Lake, Oregon,” 1939 — one of the murals in “The Story of Food Plants” series. Moessel also painted two maps for the series, one of which shows the ancient trade routes of the world.

As buildings have been restored, his frescoes and murals have been rediscovered and preserved, sparking new research and a new appreciation of his work. German art historian Judith Breuer has documented 47 of Moessel’s architectural projects in Europe. She also has investigated Moessel’s presumed work with two German architects, which, when documented, would put the number a good deal higher.

Moessel’s output during the Chicago years can only be imagined. The artist estimated in 1947 that he had something on the order of 1,000 yards of completed paintings in his studio, which at the time of his death was stacked to the ceiling with finished pieces. Today, his paintings hang in the art museum at Southern Utah University, Lew Wallace High School in Gary, Ind., the Union League Club of Chicago, Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Ind., and the Illinois State Museum, as well as in private collections in the United States and Germany — and perhaps in countless homes (and attics?) around Chicago.

However, The Field Museum murals are the only works by Moessel on public display in his adopted hometown. A “must” event in the Chicago art scene of 1940, the murals today hang in quiet dignity in the **Plants of the World** exhibit, casting their shadows over the scientific displays of coffee, honeysuckle, witch hazel, waterlilies and the like. But until they are experienced and enjoyed directly by visitors, their whole story — the story of brush strokes on canvas, toil and temperament — can never be fully told. So the next time you are wandering through this hall, pause a while to look up and recall an important moment in Chicago and The Field Museum’s artistic history, and, if only for a few minutes, rescue Julius Moessel from the obscurity of time. **ITF**