From Mantel to Museum: The History of William and Edwin Sommers’ *The Bordner Mural*

Wendy Kendall-Hess
Assistant Curator, Akron Art Museum
1223 Ledgewood Drive
Akron, OH 44333

*The Bordner Mural* is an oil painting on board that was executed primarily by northeastern Ohio artist William Sommer to adorn a private residence in Peninsula, just a few miles away from Sommer’s own home in Brandywine. Although formerly affixed to a wall in that house, this piece, which measures almost five feet high by four feet wide, is now in the collection of the Akron Art Museum. For scholars of William Sommer and his art, *The Bordner Mural* is a painting that should demand attention for several reasons. It is the only mural among the eleven known examples executed or designed by Sommer that was developed for display in a private, rather than a public, setting. Furthermore, it is signed both by him and by Edwin, the second of his three sons, and so is the only known existing example of a collaboration between these two. And lastly, this painting exemplifies the senior Sommer’s mature work, for it brings together most of the major themes that he explored in his art from the late 1920s onward: landscape, livestock and children. Although these three different subjects were among William Sommer’s favorites, they seldom appear together in his art. *The Bordner Mural* is clearly a noteworthy work, but one that until now has been largely ignored. By attempting to trace the history and development of this painting and explain its content, I hope to better clarify the full extent of its significance.

*The Bordner Mural* got its title from its original owners, Robert Bordner and Ruth King Bordner. To better understand *The Bordner Mural*, it is useful to know the background of its first owners. Robert Bordner, a newspaper writer for the *Cleveland Press*, was perhaps as much appreciated by those who knew him for his amusing eccentricities as for his intelligence, charm and affability. Bordner worked for the Press from 1923 until 1963, and during that time, served as editor of several departments, including the Arts, City, and State. He was devoted to his newspaper work and helped found the American Newspaper Guild’s Number One Unit in Cleveland. He was also a creative writer who went to several Bread Loaf Writer’s Conferences to hone his skills. Bordner had an abiding love of all the fine arts and was quite involved with northeastern Ohio’s arts community. He was one of the people who first suggested the idea of the “Print-A-Month” Club to Kalman Kubinyi, and was marginally involved in that venture from its inception. Bordner even dreamed of nurturing an artists’ and writers’ colony at his residence and, although it never materialized, he was instrumental in convincing several literary and artistic friends to move nearby. He was also a friend to many of the area’s artists. William Sommer was one of those with whom he was closest and arguably the one whose art Bordner most favored. Robert’s
wife Ruth King Bordner was no mere appendage to her husband, but an outstanding achiever in her own right. She was an award-winning tennis player, having won the mixed doubles amateur championship of Ohio, Indiana and Kentucky; a gifted pianist; director of radio station WTAM for a number of years; and editor of the Plain Dealer’s radio column for a time. In all, she, like her husband, was an exemplary individual.

Robert Bordner’s family had been linked to Peninsula for generations, for his ancestors had pioneered the area as Yankee surveyors. In 1934, he and Ruth looked for a site to purchase in Peninsula and were fortunate to find the old Mackey farm, a 140-acre site bordered by Oak Hill and Major Roads. They became owners of this property on November 6 of that year.4 After looking across the land on Thanksgiving day, 1934, Robert decided to name it Thanksgiving Hill, in recognition not only of that day but also in his good fortune; he truly felt that this land, filled with woods, fields and lakes, was paradise.5 The Bordners did not move to Thanksgiving Hill for some time, however. They extensively added on to and remodeled the existing house, converting it from a small frame structure into a sprawling 20-room, white frame edifice. The Bordners finally moved in late in 1936, approximately two years after purchasing the property.

Sometime in 1936 or possibly even earlier, Ruth commissioned William Sommer to paint a mural for the newly remodeled house, as a birthday gift to her husband. There are no records indicating whether this gift was to be a surprise for Mr. Bordner, but it was definitely painted in late 1936 and early 1937 and may well have been completed in time for Bordner’s birthday on January 9. The remarkable tightness and precision with which the mural fit into that spot, coupled with the absence of the typical shelf above the mantel and the placement of bookcases everywhere on that wall except above the mantel, suggests that this mural may have been incorporated into the planning of the room, rather than being added as an afterthought. Comparing the room when it housed the mural with the its current appearance supports this possibility; the simple addition of a wood border around the fireplace has rendered the space much too small for the mural now. If the inclusion of the mural was, in fact, part of the plans when developing this room, then its origins could date back as early as late 1934, when the property was first purchased. Ruth Bordner may even have gotten some help in choosing her husband’s birthday gift from an article he wrote that appeared in the Cleveland Press on October 20, 1934, less than three weeks before the Bordners became owners of Thanksgiving Hill. This article, entitled “Sommer’s Brilliant Mural Brightens Public Library,” went on to discuss a mural by Sommer in Brett Hall at Cleveland Public Library, noting that “the gorgeous mural lifts the chin of every person passing in through the front door. More than half of them stop with a smile of pleasure on their faces.”6 Such praise would have left no doubt that Robert Bordner would appreciate Ruth’s choice of gift.

By the time that William Sommer received this commission from Ruth Bordner, he was experienced at working with murals. He had been employed by some of the federal government art projects that were enacted to help artists survive the Great Depression, and had worked on private commissions
as well. Prior to 1936, in addition to the Cleveland Library mural noted above, Sommer had painted a mural in Cleveland’s Public Hall (1933) and designed three murals for the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company building at the Chicago World Fair (1933). The latter three murals have since been destroyed.

Although Edwin Sommer’s signature on The Bordner Mural attests that he was involved in its creation, the level of his involvement is not immediately clear. He had worked with his father prior to 1936 in several different capacities, and was a talented artist in his own right. During his youth, Edwin was the only one of William’s three sons who had received serious attention from his father, perhaps because he was the only one of the three who displayed notable artistic talent. Later, he earned some attention as an illustrator who, it was noted in a 1932 Akron Sunday Times article, “...earns his living painting lovely, fairy-like illustrations for children’s books” and he was prominent enough in that field to earn an entry in Who’s Who in American Illustration. He was also a fine artist who was counted among the best watercolorists in the Cleveland area during the 1930s, and was an active member of the Kokoon Arts Klub. The versatile Edwin also worked with metals and wood, and mastered basic construction skills as well. From 1928 through 1932, he built a large Tudor house on his father’s land not far from William’s house and studio. That close proximity may be why, at least for a time, Edwin produced artworks rendered in a style somewhat similar to that of his father. Examples of drawings by Edwin, when compared with those of his father reveal an influence in the handling of lines, the use of stylization, and in subject matter. At other times, however, Edwin played the guiding role in this relationship, leading his father. When the senior Sommer worked on the murals referred to above in the Firestone Building at the 1933 Chicago World Fair, Edwin was serving over him as art coordinator for the entire building. His duties involved overseeing a crew of twelve artists; developing the building’s color scheme and displays; designing several murals; and overseeing the designs of a group of other murals for the building. The newspaper article in the Cleveland Press that referred to this project noted that Edwin had “...handled some of the largest exhibits in the country, some of them in Public Hall” so he clearly had experience with murals, even if more in the capacity as a coordinator than as an artist. Also equally clear was that the father and son had worked together on major art projects prior to joining forces on The Bordner Mural.

The stylistic similarity of the two artists’ work explains why there is no apparent delineation in the mural between where one artist’s hand ends and the other one’s begins. The appearance of The Bordner Mural is really no different from those of murals executed purely by William Sommer. When compared to some of his murals such as those in the Akron Board of Education (1942) or in the Boston Community Church (1945) the style, the handling of paint and the overall aesthetic are all very much alike. Even the subject matter itself, as noted earlier, is very characteristic of William Sommer’s art. It is a country scene, featuring a young boy, a variety of livestock and buildings in the background. As in so many of the artist’s mature works, the sun occupies a central place in this scene, radiating outward,
spreading its warmth upon the land and its inhabitants. As one scholar noted, “Sommer loved to paint the sun; it seems to have been a symbol to him of life and energy.”

Some pole-like structures in the foreground break up the only otherwise empty area in the work. The different subjects depicted in this scene, all frequently-used components of William Sommer’s mature visual vocabulary from the late 1920s onward, seem as if they could have been placed together randomly. The fact, however, that almost all of his other murals depict specific scenes or themes presents the possibility that The Bordner Mural might as well.

The strongest suggestion that The Bordner Mural does present a specific scene was provided by one of the few people still alive who spent considerable time at the Bordner’s house in the decade after the mural was painted. Robert Bordner’s nephew Paul Okey, who was raised on his uncle’s land, believes that the scene shown in The Bordner Mural was not a generic farm scene, as Sommer was sometimes known to do, but rather, a highly stylized general impression of Thanksgiving Hill. Evidence to support this notion can be found in the mural itself and in several preliminary studies for it.

Consider, for example, that in The Bordner Mural two buildings are evident in the background; on the left, a large, very stylized house and to the right, a simple, barnlike structure. Several trees are shown, although they have been kept minimal so as not to obscure the sky and swelling hills. The ground slopes downward from the buildings, and livestock are scattered along this slope at top and bottom. Although the Bordner’s old estate has changed quite a bit over the past fifty-plus years, the same essential elements shown in the mural can still be seen there. There are two buildings—the Bordner’s large woodframe house on the left and a simple wooden barn just about 100 feet away—with trees and bushes scattered around. The ground behind the two structures slopes downward, not so sharply as the compressed space in the mural, but a very definite slope nonetheless. When viewing the two buildings from the bottom of this slope, the house is seen on the left and the barn, on the right.

A look at the earliest known study for this mural provides further evidence that The Bordner Mural depicts Thanksgiving Hill. An ink, colored pencil and pencil drawing, which unfortunately is undated, is in the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art. It was probably done shortly after Sommer first received his commission, in 1936 or even, conceivably, anytime after the house was purchased in late 1934. The earliness of this study is apparent in the degree to which it varies from the final work. The most obvious difference between this study and the mural is the orientation; the study is horizontal, in contrast with the mural’s vertical orientation. The foreground in the early study is also quite different from that of the final piece. The ground is composed of a series of soft but very clearly defined curves that are adorned with several rows of the small dots that are known as “Bill’s Buttons.” The sun that is so evident in the mural is absent here. Additionally, the single large structure shown at the back of the composition is much more detailed than are the two buildings depicted in the final mural, and this is where a definite similarity between the scene shown and the Bordner’s estate is most evident. When the large house in the early sketch is compared with two different photographs of the Bordner’s house at
Thanksgiving Hill, a certain similarity between the Bordner's house and that depicted in the study can be seen. Although Sommer almost never intended his works to offer realistic representations of what he was depicting, the structure shown in the study, with its two clearly rendered brick chimneys, peaked front, and long body, certainly captures the feeling of the Bordner's house. The barn was not yet included in this early version, but the animals that lived in there were not forgotten. As the house became less detailed during the transition from the early study to final work, the number, variety and detailing of the animals increased. There are only three animals in this early study; they appear to be cows, all standing in profile upon the curving hills. Two of these were evidently part of the plan from the beginning, and a third on the far right was added later, rendered in pencil on top of a pre-existing drawing. That contrasts strongly with the mural itself, which supports an entire menagerie: three cows, one standing and two lying down; two horses on the left hand side, one running toward the viewer and the other facing away; and five chickens, scattered around the lower foreground of the image. This selection of livestock adds evidence that the mural was based upon Thanksgiving Hill, for according to Paul Okey, the Bordners kept a variety of animals on their land, including cows, horses, and chickens.14

The child seated in the mural's foreground is another important clue as to how this mural evolved. In the Cleveland Museum of Art study, the figure is seated, cross-legged, in the lower right corner of the image. Although the outlines of his clothing are not fully defined, he appears to be bare-headed and clad in overalls that are cut off at the knee. His arms are crossed in front of him. Just to his right is the simplified outline of another figure that was probably put in to explore an alternative placement for the child. A third tiny figure has been penciled in way in back, underneath the third cow. It may represent a third alternative for placing the seated boy, or perhaps Sommer was considering putting figures in both fore- and backgrounds. Sommer's decision to put a young boy in the scene when the Bordners were childless seems to break from the accuracy with which the mural's other details corresponded to Thanksgiving Hill, but even that could have been rooted in fact. The Bordners had a series of different men assist them with the task of caring for their 140 acres. These men lived on the grounds of Thanksgiving Hill, and some of them had wives and children who stayed there with them.15 Given Sommer's fondness for drawing children, he probably did not need much of an excuse to include one in the work.

The colors in the early study—blues, yellows, and rusty tones—are essentially the same as those that were used in the final work, although their distribution and amounts vary quite a bit, as does the manner that Sommer applied them. The study has blocks of color that overlap, while the completed mural confines colors to specific areas.

Viewed as a whole, this study offers strong evidence that The Bordner Mural was meant to depict Thanksgiving Hill. Sommer's effort to capture accurately—though in a very stylized way—the characteristics of Thanksgiving Hill may well have led him to bring almost all of his favorite subjects from his mature style together in one piece.
A tiny pencil sketch that appears to be the second known study for *The Bordner Mural* provides another opportunity to trace the development of the work over time. It is not nearly so detailed as the earliest version, but it appears to be closer to the composition of the finished version, and though it is undated, it is almost certainly a later study. This tiny, scribbled pencil sketch, a mere 1 13/16 inches high by 2 7/16 inches wide in dimension, is found on an inside page of an April 1926 *Vanity Fair* magazine. The discrepancy between the date of the magazine and the probable date of the work is not unusual when dealing with William Sommer. Numerous recollections of the artist note that he drew constantly, on anything at hand and a number of these quick sketches were done on magazines or journals. Sommer was not one to throw away his old magazines, however, but hung on to all of his reading materials. After his death in 1949, among his belongings were found a number of art, literary and related journals dating back to the late nineteenth century—more than fifty years. In all likelihood, this drawing was done ten years after the magazine date, sometime in 1936.

The drawing itself seems to offer a very simplified version of the scene in the completed *Bordner Mural*, one that was apparently sketched very quickly. Sommer used the border of an advertisement in the magazine to define the left side and bottom of the sketch. The orientation of the study is still horizontal, but there are now two buildings near the top rather than the one in the earlier study. The sun makes its first appearance here; its rays stretch outward, almost completely filling the background. In the foreground, which still slopes downward, the seated figure has been shifted to the lower left. There is only one animal, situated next to the figure. It is too unfinished to determine whether it is a cow or a horse. A broad line cuts in a diagonal from the bottom of the image toward the right. Although it looks almost like a road, it is not so different from the diagonal that cuts from bottom right to upper left in the previous study, and so does not seem out of place.

The third *Bordner Mural* study is in the collection of the Akron Art Museum, and it is almost identical to the finished work, but on a much smaller scale. The image itself measures 12 1/2 inches high by 11 1/4 inches wide, but additional space on the right hand side, empty except for a very loose sketch of a figure, brings its actual width to 18 inches. This study was probably executed shortly before the mural itself was started, for it is almost identical to the mural in every detail. Not much is known about this study, but it is unique in being the only one that has any written documentation referring to it. In a 1950 *Cleveland Press* column focusing on the William Sommer Memorial Exhibition at the Cleveland Museum of Art, writer Milton Widder noted that “Reporter Bob Bordner, an early supporter of the artist, exclaimed with joy as he walked into the back gallery—a sketch for the mural in his home on Thanksgiving Hill was hanging on the wall. ‘I never saw that before,’ said Bob—his waxed mustache quivering”.

Unfortunately, because this work was one of those that were featured in the exhibition but not in the catalogue, the ownership of this work is unknown. It was probably owned by the artist, because ultimately it ended up in Robert Bordner’s own collection. There are a few differences between this study and the actual mural. This work, unlike the mural, exists on two layers. A small area in the center has
been painted upon a piece of cardboard affixed over the main piece of paper. Compositionally, there is only one real difference from the completed work; the lower right corner is not quite resolved, and there are no less than ten chickens in this image that are outlined and either fully or partially filled in. Perhaps the most important difference between this work and the mural, however, is the most informative one—the signature. This piece, almost identical to The Bordner Mural, is signed by William Sommer alone. That provides virtual proof that while Edwin helped his father paint The Bordner Mural (perhaps in an effort to make a deadline), the composition, color choices and planning were exclusively William’s contributions.

The Bordner Mural remained in its original home until 1968, when Thanksgiving Hill was sold for $153,000 to Albrecht Saalfield and his wife, Agnes Gund Saalfield. At that time, Ruth King Bordner was long gone, having died of a heart attack early in 1960. In late December of that same year, Robert Bordner had married again, to Eunice Merton, a woman he had known for many years. Merton was something of a local celebrity; the first woman to go through Ohio State University’s School of Horticulture, she owned a large plant nursery, worked as a landscape designer, wrote for a suburban newspaper, and produced the “Bangs Corners Bug Barometer,” a folksy seasonal weather forecast based on Merton’s observations of insects and animals. When the Saalfields purchased the Bordners’ property, a deal was reached whereby the Bordners retained use of a portion of the house for their summer residence. The mural over the fireplace was removed and remained in the Bordners’ keeping. Following Eunice’s death in 1971, it became Robert’s property exclusively. After he died in 1973, it was donated, along with much of the rest of his art collection, to the then Akron Art Institute.

When this work arrived at the Institute, it showed the effects of having been over a fireplace for more than thirty years. The surface was so badly obscured by smoke stains and dirty streaks that the work could not be shown. Between 1989 and 1991, however, the Akron Art Museum used a National Endowment for the Arts grant to conserve this piece, along with a number of other Sommer works from Bordners’ collection. The Bordner Peninsula Library Fund also provided support, made possible through funding designated in Robert Bordner’s will to help care for those works that he left to the Institute. Today, this painting with its rich history, strong ties to the area, and tremendous visual appeal, is a valued part of the Akron Art Museum collection.
Endnotes

1. The work’s exact measurements are 55 inches high x 47 inches wide.

2. The other murals that Sommer is known to have designed and/or painted are those in the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company Building, Chicago World Fair (three different murals, 1933); Cleveland’s Public Hall (1933); Cleveland Public Library, Main Branch (1933-34); Geneva Post Office (1938); The Akron Board of Education Building (1942); the Community Church of Boston (1945); and two different taverns that the artists frequented, Louis Yerse’s 82 & 8 Tavern in Northfield Center (1943) and an unidentified tavern in Boston referred to in Robert Bordner’s writings (1930s).

3. Among the materials that Bordner left to the Akron Art Museum after his death were a number of “Print-a-Month” Club prints in the preliminary stages, with notations on measurements, tones and placement. These indicate that his involvement extended to the Club’s actual operations.

4. Records of the Summit County Auditor’s Office.


7. Ray Sommer, William’s youngest son, did exhibit some photographs and paintings but these were strictly amateur efforts.


9. Edna Marie Clark, Ohio Art and Artists (Richmond, VA: Richmond, Garrett and Massie, 1932), 355-56.


11. Ibid.


15. Ibid.


18. The institution now known as the Akron Art Museum was founded as the Akron Art Institute in 1922. The name was not changed until 1980.

I also received valuable information from the following individuals who knew the Bordners or Sommer personally: Mary Manning Brody; Honore Guilbeau Cook; Henry Francis; Algesa O’Sickey; Viktor Schreckengost; Marvin Sommer; and John Wilkinson.