

Oscar B. Jacobson: Early Life of an Oklahoma Artist, 1882–1916



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Europeans have long held a fascination with the culture of the American West. As a Swedish-American who grew up on a Kansas farm, Oscar B. Jacobson (1882–1966) embraced western art and culture. Western artists of the nineteenth century typically depicted their subject matter as an alluring, mythical American frontier. They added a degree of mystery combined with a spirit of adventure to draw people into their work. These ideals helped shape Jacobson's lifestyle. The early development of the University of Oklahoma's (OU) art program owes much of its success to Jacobson who, while working at the University of Oklahoma, assisted in initiating the beginning stages of the art department. In 1936, he was given the title of the first director at the University of Oklahoma Art Museum, known today as the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art. He is most known for promoting American Indian art, and for supporting the success of six Kiowa artists. These six talented Native artists created murals and paper art,

growing to international fame by emphasizing culturally significant images and originality in their work. In addition to teaching, Jacobson himself remained a prolific artist, producing more than six hundred works in his time. He specialized in western landscape art due to his love of the Southwest, and exhibited his work in various venues around the nation over the course of his lifetime. For his efforts, Jacobson was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame in 1949. Throughout his life, Jacobson underwent a variety of experiences that influenced his iconic western art. In order to understand Jacobson's success, it is important to recognize his background and his love of the Southwest.

It all started with the young Oscar Jacobson, born in 1882 in Västervik, a town on the southeastern coast of Sweden.¹ His first adventure as a youngster began when he and his brother, Ernst, attempted to sail a boat on the Baltic Sea, destined for Russia. A concerned citizen apprehended the two boys and returned them to their parents after the failed maritime expedition.² This spirit of adventure never left Jacobson, and throughout his life he traveled, explored, and painted countless locations around the world. Even after his family relocated to Lindsborg, Kansas, in 1890, he continued his wanderlust as he prepared for a career as an artist and educator.

The family's transfer to America began with Pastor Olof Olsson, who led a group of Swedish immigrants from the Värmland province of Sweden to Lindsborg, Kansas, in 1869. Originally, they "envisioned a community rich in culture, learning, religion, business, and farming."³ Jacobson's father, Nils Peter Jakobson, settled nearby to start a small, family-run stock farm with his wife, Anne Lena Olofsdotter, and his three sons, Ernst, Karl, and Oscar Jakobson.⁴ As a boy, Oscar had many pleasant recollections from his life on his father's farm, such as fishing, hunting, and riding horses. Nevertheless, the adventurous eight-year-old Oscar, forced to do grueling work on the family farm day in and day out, wished for more. The labor came without pay, so, at the early age of thirteen he decided to go out on his own. After he ran away from home, he worked on western ranches and stock farms for a small wage, occasionally with threshing crews, sleeping in soft, new straw stacks under the starry skies. His decision to leave home was critical for starting his career as an artist. Not only did he earn money, but he also gained critical experience working as a ranch hand that contributed to his knowledge of and passion for the Southwest.⁵ Jacobson left in search of inspiration.

While Jacobson was in search of study, another known Swedish-American artist, Birger Sandzén, lived in Kansas. He later became Jacobson's art instructor. Sandzén (1871–1954), depicted landscape

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pieces that dramatically transformed the concept of southwestern American art. As a young artist, Sandzén aspired to be a student at the Royal Academy of Art in Stockholm; however, the waiting list proved to be too long. Instead, he learned first-hand from key artists such as Anders Zorn (1860–1920), Richard Bergh (1858–1919), and Edmond Aman-Jean (1858–1936), who were creating the contemporary European art of the time.⁶ These artists are associated with pointillism, which uses dots of paint to create an illusion of an evenly painted surface. It resembles impressionism, with a sketchy, unfinished appearance, but has uniform and vibrant surfaces of spotted paint instead of smooth dashes of mixed color.⁷

In 1894 Sandzén joined the Bethany Academy, a school founded by Swedish-Lutheran settlers in 1881, and helped establish the art program and began teaching promising students.⁸ Jacobson's instructor, Sandzén, learned how to paint from post-impressionists and pointillists, but added his Swedish flair to his work, which heavily influenced his attentive pupils at Bethany. Sandzén's mature painting style evolved in the 1910s, after Jacobson was his student.⁹ Early on in his career, he taught his students with the skills he acquired as a working artist in Sweden. His themes contained playful brush strokes and pigments similar to an impressionistic painting, but with distinctly western scenes. Traditionally, western artists such as George Catlin (1796–1872), John Mix Stanley (1814–72), Frederic Remington (1861–1909), and Charles M. Russell (1864–1926) are known for their painterly depiction of the rugged frontier. In general, these artists portrayed cowboys on horseback racing stampeding herds of cattle, beautiful sunsets setting over a wild land, and American Indians embracing their culture. Sandzén celebrated the American West by painting peaceful landscapes with bright, enticing colors that engaged his audience.

Jacobson showed artistic talent at an early age. In 1895 he attended a beginning art class at Bethany College when he was thirteen years old.¹⁰ In 1889 the school was renamed Bethany College, and during this time the school served as a preparatory school featuring art classes for young pupils comprised of three classes: First Class, Second Class, and Third Class.¹¹ Ideally, upon completing these courses the dedicated fine art students would become part of the freshmen class at the school.¹² Sandzén served as the "Guardian" of the First Class during Jacobson's initial art class in 1895.¹³ Besides the basic principles, such as movement, color, texture, harmony, and balance, the students learned how to paint in the style of the Swedish masters and French impressionists under the supervision of Sandzén. Even

at such a young age, Jacobson showed extreme potential. Jacobson's instructor, Sandzén, became an inspiration to him and helped pave the way for Jacobson's success, which led to Jacobson returning five years later to complete his degree in art under Sandzén's direction.

Jacobson attended Bethany College for a second time, from 1900–03.¹⁴ This time he concentrated his efforts to complete a bachelor's degree in fine arts. Numerous factors contributed to his decision to attend Bethany. First, the college is based in Kansas and established by Swedish immigrants like himself.¹⁵ Second, it was economical for him to attend art school in that area. Third, Professor Sandzén still taught there, and he continued to be influential in Jacobson's artistic growth. His studies under Sandzén allowed him to focus on modern art. He admired the contemporary art in Sweden and his work in school conformed to his original identity as a natural-born Swede. Jacobson later described Swedish art as follows:

Sweden's art possesses a national character; it is more positive and full of atmosphere than any other country's represented. The charm of breezy thought and unusual methods of working appear in the majority of canvasses. Sunsets and moonlights are the favorite themes among these; most of them have the vital qualities of trained technique and poetic inspiration which is determined to deliver its message; if some canvasses should appear crude, it all finds redeeming qualities in its earnestness and perfect sincerity.¹⁶

To some degree, he followed in his mentor's footsteps using thick, impasto brushstrokes in his own art, but later Jacobson opted for the angular, planar aesthetic of Paul Cézanne, a post-impressionistic painter.¹⁷ Not until later in his schooling did Jacobson learn to develop his own unique style within the Swedish tradition, heavily resembling pointillistic, impressionistic, and post-impressionistic painting genres to create his own style of art.

Despite the similarities of Birger Sandzén's art and Jacobson's paintings, they have their own unique characteristics. Jacobson paid attention to the teachings of Sandzén. Jacobson's own art is comparable to Sandzén's style, including similar subjects, colors, and even brushstrokes. Later in his career, Jacobson wrote:

As a painter, Mr. Sandzén ranks high. I do not hesitate to pronounce him the best of all artists in America of Swedish birth and training. In later years he has devoted himself to the painting of the great West. His mountains, buttes, canyons, and cotton-

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wood groves are universally admired. His manner of treatment is original and full of spirit and poetry. In fact, he is one of the very few who have really been able to grasp the spirit of the great Western landscape. His colors are light and cheerful and reminds one of the Modern French Masters, yet thoroughly his own. His technique is directed and masterful whether the medium be oil, water color, or charcoal.¹⁸

Jacobson studied Birger Sandzén's early work. The teacher's art had its own unique style during Jacobson's time at Bethany, but, later, Sandzén's pieces were more thoroughly developed with smoother brushstrokes, making his style less pointillistic. As both artists matured in their abilities, their art began to grow. Sandzén remained influential to Jacobson's artistic career. Jacobson's high regard for Sandzén lasted until his teacher's death in 1954.

During his senior year at Bethany College, Jacobson decided to experience the Old West firsthand to help in creating his western landscapes. In 1903 he networked with his peers by sharing his passion for art. On one occasion, he went with a group of classmates from Bethany to paint the rural areas of Kansas, referring to himself as "Mustang Jake."¹⁹ Playing upon his name, Jacobson, he often signed letters with "Jake," especially to Sandzén.²⁰ This outside fieldwork allowed for the students at Bethany College to apply their knowledge of art to a surrounding environment, influencing Jacobson's change in focus from portraiture to western landscapes. The party took a covered wagon and a team of livestock out to a secluded area of Kansas to camp. The goal was to experience nature and paint the surrounding area to supplement their art training. Over the course of the eventful journey, which extended over a distance of about eighty miles, they visited Horse Thieves' Canyon, the Mushroom Rocks at Carneiro, Red Rock Canyon, Krunger's Ranch, and Sherman's Ranch. Unrestrained by the conventionalities of college civilization they were surrounded by natural beauties reminiscent of the Garden of the Gods in Colorado. The images of these secluded places remained in Jacobson's mind throughout his career, and he later painted landscapes with titles such as *Garden of the Gods* (c. 1923) and *Red Rock* (1942). Eventually, after traveling, working, and attending art classes in different areas, he graduated in 1908 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts, but continued to participate in the art department until opportunity arose in Missouri.²¹

Jacobson acquired a fine arts position at the 1904 World's Fair in Saint Louis, which jumpstarted his career as both an artist and an educator. He first served on the Jefferson Guard as a security detail,



Burn's Cottage and Swedish Building at the 1904 World's Fair in Saint Louis (photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress).

but he left that position in favor of becoming the custodian of art. The Swedish Royal Government hired Oscar Jacobson to look after the art submitted to the World's Fair celebrating the one hundredth anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase. At the time, Saint Louis was touted as the center of the consumer world market for technological and educational advancement, and it was the center for art and culture in the area.²² The World's Fairs occurred periodically in various countries, making Jacobson's participation in the exposition tremendously impressive. Although Jacobson did not submit paintings to the event, he was custodian and later the secretary for the Swedish Royal Commission and was charged with taking care of the art representing Sweden.²³

The Royal Commission appointed him responsible for the art exhibited by Swedish painters, sculptors, and craftsmen. Senator Joseph R. Burton, Colonel Edward C. Culp, Birger Sandzén, and Reverend Doctor Carl Swensson supported his employment, thus creating Jacobson's first major role in an internationally recognized art exhibition, which skyrocketed his career.²⁴ This position allowed him to show his character as a person, display his vast knowledge of fine art, and hone the valuable skill of critiquing works by other artists. This experience helped him obtain jobs at Minnesota College, State College of Washington at Pullman, and the University of Oklahoma later in his career. A reporter from his hometown newspaper wrote, "Mr. Jakobson is a very talented young man, and the fact that the Swedish government has placed so great a trust in his care speaks very highly for him."²⁵ Once the fair ended, he oversaw the crating of the paintings, and he was accountable for sending them back to Sweden. The young art cus-

Professor Oscar Jacobson on the cover of a Minnesota College Art Department pamphlet, September 1909 (M85.109, scrapbook 1, Oscar B. Jacobson Collection, OHS).



todian took his job seriously and catered to the needs of the Swedish government and the jury chosen to judge the art.²⁶

Jacobson sent two letters to his former professor, Sandzén, describing his time at the World's Fair. On August 5, 1904, he wrote:

For the last 4 weeks, I have done nothing but handled and seen paintings of all nations size and kinds. I have seen so much art that my eyes are sore. All last week I have been down in the Museum of Fine Art 18 & Louis St. helping the Jury. They are in session now, so after next week, many a poor devil of an artist will be disappointed or happy. All the work west of Pittsburg is sent here, so you see the Western division comprises quite a large area. We have received some excellent work, but you ought to see all the from, yes 'friends' things that we have received. Every odd maid in the country sends his 'masterpiece' with a great big letter hoping that it will win the Grand 'Prix.' Oh! It's amusing. Almost half of the work will never reach the Jury at all.²⁷

They received few exceptional pieces, and, in this letter, Jacobson said that the largest painting was a seven-foot-by-ten-foot canvas that was similar to the mediocre works. He wrote, "I do wish that you would have sent something, I know you would have gone there because

I could at least have done that much, than [*sic*] your work would have been passed upon by the jury."²⁸ This comment demonstrates the high esteem Jacobson had for Sandzén. The jury for the Swedish Exposition only passed on one-fifth of the paintings that were submitted, and Jacobson knew that if Sandzén had submitted pieces, his work would have been accepted. By comparing the exceptional pieces to the bad, Jacobson realized that "I am not at all ashamed of our little school, of course location is against us. Almost all the good work came from the East."²⁹ He ended the letter with a few words and signed off as "Jake." This is the first of two letters from Jacobson to Sandzén in which Jacobson expressed in great detail his role as the caretaker of the paintings for the Swedish government.³⁰

After Sandzén replied, Jacobson responded with a second letter, dated April 15, 1904. He detailed the behind-the-scenes version of the screening and exhibit process. "We are now done with the Jury and many a poor artist is disappointed. Only about 1/5 of the work was accepted. . . . They seemed to favor the broad, dashy new school. In fact the old school is not in it at all. Very little of the work is over 5–6 years old."³¹ Unsatisfied with the Swedish work, Jacobson entertained himself with the art of other countries to fulfill his hunger for high quality pieces.

At the World's Fair, numerous countries were represented, including France and Germany. Two notable artists from these countries were French artist William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825–1905) and German-American artist Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902). To Sandzén, Jacobson proclaimed, "Oh! The French art is glorious. They are the leaders all right. Bouguereau has a couple of nudes I have seen nothing to compare with his flesh color. Laurens has some and one that I noticed more than good money in Albert Bierstadt."³² This was modern art of the time. The fact that Jacobson introduced himself to Bouguereau's and Bierstadt's art is significant to his career, as these painters decidedly influenced the international art world. Familiar with the high standards of fine art, Jacobson incorporated these ideals into his own work. Although Jacobson preferred the post-impressionistic works, he appreciated the paintings of the great Romantic period of artists during his age. Additionally, he continued to inform Sandzén of all he witnessed during the process of unpacking art for Sweden, remarking on how fortunate he was to meet the people involved in the exhibition. He recalled, "I also met Dr. Lagerstedt the Swedish Royal Commissioner. . . . The exhibit is not very large (only 6 rooms) but is alright. Some fine pieces of sculpture have arrived. Oh! I'm awful tickled that I got to meet these big guns."³³ Being part of the World's

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Fair gave Jacobson the insight he needed to further his career as an artist.

With the end of the World's Fair, Jacobson realized what he wanted to attend Yale University for art. In 1905 he went to the same institution that had attracted the southwestern artist Frederic Remington years before. Originally from New England, Remington studied art at Yale from 1878–79. The cowboy way of life had always fascinated Jacobson, partly because of his European background. The similarities between Jacobson and Remington are apparent, and Jacobson's admiration of Remington's art showed in his own western paintings. In Jacobson's unpublished biography on Remington, he wrote, "Always an athlete [he had been a football star at Yale] he soon mastered the skills of a cowboy and was accepted by the westerners as their equal. He rode like a centaur, threw a wicked lariat and was adept at handling a sharp shooter."³⁴ In addition to Remington's ability as a cowboy, Jacobson found his warmhearted interaction with American Indians endearing. Upon chance meetings with American Indians in the field, Remington consistently treated them with great respect, often adding them to his sketches. Remington ventured west to find images to paint and transport back east. These pieces supported him for several years. While working for *Harper's Weekly* he published his images in the magazine, which eventually led him to other, more permanent homes for his paintings. Slowly, Remington's monetary success grew, and he built a studio large enough to house models sitting on equestrian mounts. Fortunately, Jacobson stopped by this cherished western artist's studio during Remington's lifetime. He recalled, "I visited him in this comfortable establishment, in 1906. There he was busy painting western scenes from his many sketches, but often using his coachman and neighbors as models. He was always a very hard worker."³⁵ Three years later, the famous cowboy artist died of complications with appendicitis in 1909 at the age of forty-eight.³⁶ Jacobson's personal encounter with Remington fueled his desire to continue working with landscapes across the United States.

Like Remington, Yale University became Jacobson's home for the next two and one-half years as he pursued his graduate studies in fine arts from 1905–07. Due to his expensive tuition, he worked a variety of odd jobs, including cashier in a cafeteria, clerk in a bookstore, assistant in the library, and head usher in the Shubert Theatre, until he won the Harry F. English Scholarship for fine arts in 1906.³⁷ Jacobson continued a high level of excellence in his fine art training. Under the direction of Professor A. G. Thompson, he learned the academic approach to art.³⁸



Oscar Jacobson as Mustango in Sunset, photograph published in the Saturday Chronicle, New Haven, Connecticut, December 14, 1907 (M85.109, scrapbook 1, Oscar B. Jacobson Collection, OHS).

During his time at Yale, he completed *The Old Trapper* (1905–07) and *The Quarter Breed* (1907). *The Quarter Breed* is a portrait of a cowboy who had his head turned in so that the viewer was dramatically reminded of a living cowboy. Jacobson drew ideas from what he knew. He grew up on ranches riding horses. In New Haven, Connecticut, the symbol of the cowboy became imperative to his identity as an artist. Although Jacobson created other canvases, the powerful cowboy head caused much comment at the Paint and Clay Club exhibition on March 19, 1907.³⁹ His participation in the seventh exhibition of the Paint and Clay Club was only the first of the endeavors that made up his academic art career. His work hung between two famous nineteenth-century American artists, John Singer Sargent (1856–1925) and James Abbott McNeil Whistler (1834–1903).⁴⁰ Oscar Jacobson found his place as a Western artist.

Jacobson's interest in western culture revealed itself in other ways while Jacobson attended Yale University. He participated in other organizations and clubs supplementary to his painting studies. Along with his art, he displayed interest in acting in *Sunset*, a theatrical performance written by his friend Victor Oscar Freeburg. Initially performed at the club's meetinghouse at Prospect Beach in West

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Haven, Connecticut, in August 1907, the tragedy included a portrayal of life among American Indians, in which Jacobson played a Kaw chief named Mustango.⁴¹ Because of its success, it was performed in numerous other venues across the state. The one-act tragedy takes place in Kansas in the year 1867, and revolves around a fictitious American Indian maiden named Princess Sunset. She is pursued by two lovers, a rancher named Richard Stanhope and a man referred to as Colonel Cole.⁴² Disagreements arise, and the two men involve Sunset's father, Mustango. They argue, endangering all who are caught up in the love triangle. Jacobson, dressed in deerskin garb and sporting an impressive feathered headdress, acted as the warrior chief. Sunset sets out to save her father, but she ends up losing her life. The play is set up in one act with six scenes including "The Grievance," "Rivals," "Premonitions," "The Game," "The Shooting," and "The Parting."⁴³ The play ends tearfully, but it exemplifies Jacobson's passion for American Indian culture. Jacobson's involvement in the drama demonstrated his interest in Native culture and became a foundation for his involvement with the six Kiowa artists during his time at the University of Oklahoma.⁴⁴

Jacobson did not stay to complete his Master of Fine Arts at Yale University; instead he traveled west, much like Remington, who also did not complete his degree at Yale. In his unpublished biography of Remington, Jacobson wrote, "His strong personality rebelled at the rigidity of academic teaching, so, when his father died, in 1880, and his sweetheart's father questioned his stability, he left Yale and went west. He was going to show the world the stuff he was made of; he was going to earn a million dollars."⁴⁵ Although discussing Remington, Jacobson's view of Remington's experience at Yale was colored by his own view of academic art at the university. He lasted longer than Remington, staying for two and one-half years (1905–07) before moving.⁴⁶

In 1908 a teaching position at Minnesota College in Minneapolis became available and Jacobson accepted the offer, hoping to establish an art school in the West.⁴⁷ Established in 1904, the new Swedish-Lutheran college of Minnesota was only four years old by the time Jacobson received his first teaching position as the head of the Art Department. Like Bethany College, Swedish-American immigrants built Minnesota College. As head of the Art Department, Jacobson implemented a new art curriculum, which helped the school tremendously with its art degree and variety of programs at the college. Basing his classes on individual work, Jacobson held high standards for his students. By the fall of his first year, he had established an art curriculum at Minnesota College, and he became responsible for the art

pieces that the university acquired.⁴⁸ As curator, he acknowledged the donation of the Century Collection, which contained fifteen paintings reserved for the art exhibit for the students.⁴⁹ It included original works from his former professors Sandzén and Thompson. Sandzén gifted two beautiful canvases to Jacobson's school. One piece depicted Naples and the other a landscape of the American West.⁵⁰ By using his former professors as contacts, Jacobson added pieces to the rapidly growing collection, creating a symbiotic relationship between him and his highly regarded teachers that lasted throughout his career.

During Jacobson's time at Minnesota College, he began painting to supplement his teaching income. In 1908 he painted several important portraits that expanded his reputation, including a life-size portrait of Revenuer T. T. Munger (1908) and Governor John A. Johnson (1908). The community enjoyed his work and fueled the demand for Jacobson's canvases. By the end of this year, Jacobson had several commissions lined up for the portraits, including those of President Frank Nelson of Minnesota College (1908), Mr. Axel Anderson (1908), and Mrs. E. G. Dahl (1909). He picked up momentum and proceeded to paint enthusiastically for the rest of his life.⁵¹

By the time Jacobson became a professor at the State College of Washington at Pullman, Washington (later Washington State University), in 1911, he taught painting and drawing and was beginning to create a reputation as an artist and professor. His prestige as a portrait artist contributed to his promotion as a professor at the institution.⁵² In 1912 Jacobson sent a postcard of his new campus to his old teacher and friend, Sandzén. Jacobson exclaimed, "Great school, but art department is underdeveloped! Do you think work will be different? People simply lovely! Everything new!"⁵³ At Pullman, Jacobson applied his skills to building the "undeveloped" art department. Once again, Jacobson found himself as the head of a newly developed program for art and art history in addition to a curatorial position at the school.⁵⁴

While still painting and teaching, he organized art exhibits and acquired items for the Washington State collection. As part of art education at Pullman, Jacobson required the students to submit work for an exhibition each year. Jacobson led by example, as he submitted two pieces to the 1912 show. A reporter commented that "the charm of Mr. Jacobson's work—notably his *Water Babies* [c. 1912] and *Child at the Seashore* [c. 1912]—the fidelity of his portraiture and the breadth of his technique set a worthy standard for his pupils."⁵⁵ Under his guidance, valuable art pieces appeared in the school's art collection, resulting in a representative collection of paintings from

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well-established artists. Furthermore, "Professor Oscar Jacobson, the founder of the Art School, donated a number of his works to the Department last September. Four etchings by George Resler, a head by Lee Woodward Zeigler, and several paintings by Nathaniel Pousette have also been added to the collection during the year."⁵⁶ Each school with which Jacobson was affiliated benefited from his generosity.

As a professor, Jacobson taught three different courses at Washington State. In his first lecture, "Teachers' Art Course," the students were "trained for teachers or supervisors of Art Education in public and private schools."⁵⁷ The course was comprised of drawing, charcoal, pen and ink, and still-life drawing. In this class, Jacobson also taught perspective and blackboard drawing for teachers. He focused on showing students how to draw landscapes with colored pencils and watercolors for fieldwork. In his second lecture, simply titled "Design," the curriculum described the course as "a study of the principles of design and their application to furniture, art metal work, stenciling, interior decoration, etc."⁵⁸ They worked in black and white with positive and negative space drawing, as well as color drawing. This class arranged for the students to learn the basic principles of design. For his third class, Jacobson taught "Classic Art," looking at a "rapid survey of Greek and Roman Classical Art, including architecture, sculpture, and painting."⁵⁹ Classical architecture and sculpture were and still are used in modern planning, and it was important for Jacobson's students to learn the elemental designs from Greek and Roman works directly. By using lantern slides, he illustrated the artistic contributions to his class.⁶⁰

Extracurricular activities show that Jacobson interacted with students in a different setting other than a lecture hall. In addition to his teaching duties, he organized activities for students outside the classroom. He initiated another production of *Sunset* at State College of Washington, where he played Mustango once again.⁶¹ Moreover, the Scandinavian Club formed under Jacobson's faculty supervision.⁶² At the first meeting, Jacobson read Swedish folktales and discussed writing and art in the Swedish culture. In this club, the faculty and students celebrated their heritage and discussed events from their homeland. The impact of these activities was that Jacobson could teach important life lessons to his students beyond art lectures.⁶³

While Jacobson taught at the State College of Washington, he met his wife, Sophie Jeanne Brousse d'Ucel, a French-American.⁶⁴ Employed as the chair for French literature, Sophie worked at State College of Washington after coming to America from Grenoble, France, in 1910.⁶⁵ She later adopted the name Jeanne d'Ucel as a pen name,

which she used frequently in her writings.⁶⁶ Following their wedding, August 2, 1912, Jacobson “adopted Brousse as his middle name.” For their honeymoon, they went to British Columbia, and the two never stopped traveling, which provided Jacobson with ideas and inspiration for his paintings. Jeanne was instrumental in Jacobson’s career. She was his confidant, model, travel companion, coauthor, editor, and so much more. Preserved on the pages of scrapbooks and biographical notes, the life of Oscar B. Jacobson is documented at the Oklahoma Historical Society Research Center in Oklahoma City thanks to her dedication. Without her guidance, Jacobson’s career may have gone in a different direction. Upon returning to the United States from their honeymoon in 1914, Oscar Jacobson accepted the teaching position at the University of Oklahoma, where he did the most important and inspirational work of his life.⁶⁷

The Jacobsons relocated to Oklahoma with little or no expectations for the young state. By this time, the state of Oklahoma was eight years old. Established in 1890, the University of Oklahoma was a major part of life in the new state. Outside the university, no significant structure was in the town of Norman. The land was flat, dusty, and shabby. Like most of the towns in the central part of Oklahoma, Norman developed next to the Santa Fe Railroad line. Before highways, the railroads were the best way to travel the West quickly and efficiently. When the Jacobsons moved to Oklahoma in 1915, they took the railroad south to Norman. It was nothing like they had imagined. He recalled, “Arriving in Norman at 1:30 a.m. on the Santa Fe Railroad, we engaged the one and only, tired horse cab to take us to the ‘best’ hotel. The cabby stopped in front of the Grand Central Hotel, a dilapidated frame structure opposite a livery barn on North Peters. The cabby was right, for there was no other hotel in the little town.”⁶⁸ The developing town of Norman proved to be crude and primitive compared to the areas where the Jacobsons had lived. He remarked, “As a lad, much too soon on my own, I had been quite familiar with the primitive conditions of life near the frontier. Yet our first impression of the Norman community was rather unfavorable.”⁶⁹ Despite Jacobson’s first impression, it became a home in which the Jacobsons spent the rest of their lives, contributing to the education of the students and developing the art community.

Jacobson expanded on the young art program at the University of Oklahoma under the leadership of Stratton D. Brooks, the second president of OU. During Brooks’s tenure (1912–23), the institution grew in every respect, and the student body rose from 866 to more than 5,000.⁷⁰ Students flocked in as a result of a promised four-year program

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leading to graduation. They even came from other states, creating a constant need for teachers.⁷¹ During this massive growth of the student body, Jacobson became head of the Art Department and responsible for what is known today as the School of Visual Arts. From his experiences at Minnesota College and State College of Washington, he developed an art program at OU that benefited not only the students, but also the community. He possessed a unique way of teaching. He preferred training with a hands-on and interactive curriculum that brought art and education together in fascinating ways. Because Jacobson was himself a painter, he understood that firsthand encounters with original works of art were an important component of art instruction and any other forms of education.⁷² In his unpublished article about the University of Oklahoma Museum of Art, Jacobson recorded:

In 1915 there were no art museums or collections in the state available to the public, although a few men of wealth had paintings and other works of art in their homes. Norman, Oklahoma was at that time far from any art center, the closest being Saint Louis. Yet I felt that the art students should have the opportunity to see good painting and sculpture as part of their cultural education.⁷³

Describing his fundraising efforts in developing the art school, he commented, "It was not exactly easy. The total budget for the whole University that year was \$250,000. The budget for art was under the control of the dean of the School of Music, where the needs were always so great that precious few dollars trickled down to the art department."⁷⁴ Despite these limitations, Jacobson took the art program and nurtured it into a thriving department that contributed significantly to the art community of Oklahoma.

Jacobson's notable legacy to the University of Oklahoma is the quality and variety of pieces acquired for the University of Oklahoma Museum of Art. Jacobson said that, at first, "my earliest attempts to assemble a collection were modest indeed. The first objects, obtained by President Brooks from *The Saturday Evening Post*, were original drawings that had appeared in the magazine. Most of them were destroyed . . . by a rain storm that flooded the basement of the old Art Building."⁷⁵ Keeping in mind the basic needs of any collection, Jacobson explained, "I acquired the first painting in 1916 as a gift from the art student club Les Beaux Arts. It was a lovely little landscape by Dr. Birger Sandzén, my old teacher and friend."⁷⁶ Jacobson placed Sandzén's painting in the second annual exhibition at the museum, honoring his art with a medal.⁷⁷ Later, he acquired numerous pieces including pottery, jewelry,

and other such items because of their potential research value in the future. During his time at OU, the museum contained more than 2,500 pieces in eleven different collections.⁷⁸

Toward the end of his career, Jacobson was the director of the University of Oklahoma Museum of Art (today the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art) from 1936–54. Jacobson Hall, now the home of OU's Visitor Center, was the original location of the university's art museum. It was built in 1919 and named for Oscar B. Jacobson in 1992.⁷⁹ The original collections acquired by Jacobson contained lithographs, etchings, American Indian paintings, Navajo rug blankets, North African art, American paintings from the federal Works Progress Administration, modern American art, and the Wentz-Matzene Collection of Oriental Art. These items were housed all over the university including Bizzell Memorial Library, the business building, Boyd House, and the administration building. From its humble beginnings collecting pieces from *The Saturday Evening Post*, the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art has grown tremendously since Jacobson jumpstarted the collections, and it owes much to the hard work and dedication of this tireless professor.⁸⁰

The popularity of art depicting the American West gradually began to rise in the middle of the nineteenth century, and artists such as George Catlin, Frederic Remington, John Mix Stanley, and Birger Sandzén influenced Jacobson's art. By combining western art with a post-impressionistic approach, Jacobson created work that began to redefine that genre. His art is simple and to the point. In painting a landscape, an artist gets rid of the unimportant things that the camera picks up, and, on a canvas, a person can often create the desired effect more easily, because the artist strives to catch the mood of the scene.⁸¹ More than a backdrop for his canvases, nature became a means of expressing, "intense beauty through vibrant color."⁸²

Jacobson's paintings pushed the boundaries of American art, as he incorporated impressionist values with traditional western vistas. Visually and stylistically, Oscar Jacobson expresses similarities to pointillist, impressionist, and post-impressionist artists. Traveling allowed for Jacobson to find inspiration for his paintings, focusing on the natural environment. Journeying during the summers, he visited various places all over the country and around the world. His piece *Superstition Mountains* (1916) contains a grouping of three large saguaro cacti, isolated in the Sonoran desert, with a background of towering purple mountains. Dark, billowing clouds appear above the mountain, as if an approaching storm is arriving with imminent doom, to complete this dramatic scene. His technique is straightforward but

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Monroe Tsatoke, Jack Hokeah, Steven Mopope, Oscar Jacobson, Spencer Asah, and James Auchiah, c. 1930 (21144.4.53.0, Oscar B. Jacobson Collection, OHS).

contained the desired effect of cool isolation within this dangerous land.⁸³ Jacobson described his methods, stating, “I have devoted myself to interpret the grandeur of the Southwest. My style? I don’t know how it evolved. I made no conscious attempt to create style, but it seemed to adapt automatically to the landscape I was painting. I always wanted to put in the essential facts, to be simple.”⁸⁴ His work reflects nostalgia for the southwestern frontier, while capturing the grandeur of the overpowering presence of nature. Although stylistically Jacobson’s work is more related to the French pointillists, impressionists, and post-impressionists, he still followed in the footsteps his friend Birger Sandzén and other nineteenth- and twentieth-century painters of the American West, in order to produce art uniquely his own. His dedication to students and vast knowledge of the field of art fueled the art department at the University of Oklahoma for more than thirty years, and his work will continue to be embraced by generations to come.

Endnotes

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¹ Anne Allbright, "Oscar Brousse Jacobson: A Swedish Immigrant Who Dramatically Changed Art Perception in Oklahoma" (master's thesis, University of Central Oklahoma, 2006).

² Ellen Strom, "Bethanyites In The News." *Lindsborg (KS) Record*, Spring 1954, scrapbook 7, box 7, Jacobson Collection, Research Center, Oklahoma History Center, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, OK (hereafter cited as Jacobson Collection OHS).

³ "City History," Lindsborg, Kansas, accessed October 19, 2014, ks-lindsborg2.civicplus.com/index.aspx?NID=84.

⁴ Allbright, "Oscar Brousse Jacobson."

⁵ Strom, "Bethanyites In The News," Jacobson Collection OHS.

⁶ "Stockholm and Paris," Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery.

⁷ Penelope J. E. Davies, Walter B. Denny, Frima Fox Hofrichter, Joseph F. Jacobs, Ann S. Roberts, and David L. Simon, eds., *Janson's History of Art*, 8th ed. vol. II (New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2011).

⁸ Cori North, email message to author, February 12, 2015. North is a curator at the Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery in Lindsborg, KS.

⁹ Mark White, email message to author, June 6, 2017. Dr. White is the Wylodean and Bill Saxon Director at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, Norman, OK.

¹⁰ Cori North, email message to author, October 13, 2014.

¹¹ Cori North, email message to author, February 12, 2015.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Cori North, email message to author, October 13, 2014.

¹⁵ Mayrene Bentley, "Oscar Brousse Jacobson: Western Light," artist pamphlet, Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery.

¹⁶ Oscar B. Jacobson, "Swedish Art at the World's Fair," *Lindsborg Record*, September 2, 1904, scrapbook 1, box 2, Jacobson Collection OHS.

¹⁷ Anne Allbright, Janet Catherine Berlo, and Mark Andrew White, *A World Unconquered: The Art of Oscar Brousse Jacobson* (Norman, OK: Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, 2015), 39.

¹⁸ *Bulletin*, June 1911, scrapbook 1, box 2, Jacobson Collection OHS.

¹⁹ *Lindsborg (KS) News*, October 16, 1903, 3, scrapbook 1, box 2, Jacobson Collection OHS.

²⁰ Oscar B. Jacobson to Birger Sandzén, April 5, 1904–April 15, 1904, Birger Sandzén Papers, Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery.

²¹ *Lindsborg Record*, October 16, 1903, 4, scrapbook 1, box 2, Jacobson Collection OHS.

²² "1904 World's Fair," accessed December 4, 2014, www.mohistory.org/Fair/WF/HTML/About/.

²³ *Lindsborg Record*, October 30, 1903, 6, scrapbook 1, box 2, Jacobson Collection OHS.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Bethany (KS) Messenger*, October 1904, scrapbook 1, box 2, Jacobson Collection OHS.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Oscar B. Jacobson to Birger Sandzén, April 5, 1904, Birger Sandzén Papers, Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery, 5.

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²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Oscar B. Jacobson to Birger Sandzén, April 15, 1904, 1–2.

³² Ibid., 1–8.

³³ Ibid., 1–8.

³⁴ Oscar B. Jacobson, “Frederic Remington,” unpublished manuscript, c. 1945, 1, file 7, box J-13, Jacobson Collection, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK (hereafter cited as Jacobson Collection WHC).

³⁵ Jacobson, “Frederic Remington,” 3, Jacobson Collection WHC.

³⁶ “Frederic Remington,” centerofthewest.org/explore/western-art/research/frederic-remington, accessed July 17, 2017.

³⁷ Strom, “Bethanyites In The News,” Jacobson Collection OHS.

³⁸ “The Picayune,” *Minneapolis (MN) Tribune*, February 1909, scrapbook 1, box 2, Jacobson Collection OHS.

³⁹ “Society,” *New Haven (CT) Register*, January 17, 1908, scrapbook 1, box 2, Jacobson Collection OHS.

⁴⁰ *Minneapolis Tribune*, July 1908, scrapbook 1, box 2, Jacobson Collection OHS.

⁴¹ “Sunset Scores Success,” *Saturday Chronicle* (New Haven, CT), August 13, 1907, scrapbook 1, box 2, Jacobson Collection OHS.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ *Saturday Chronicle*, August 10, 1907, Jacobson Collection OHS.

⁴⁴ “Sunset Scores Success,” *Saturday Chronicle*, August 13, 1907, Jacobson Collection OHS; *Saturday Chronicle*, August 10, 1907, Jacobson Collection OHS.

⁴⁵ Jacobson, “Frederic Remington,” 1.

⁴⁶ Strom, “Bethanyites In The News,” Jacobson Collection OHS.

⁴⁷ “Society,” *New Haven Register*, January 17, 1908, scrapbook 1, box 2, Jacobson Collection OHS.

⁴⁸ *Minneapolis Tribune*, July 1908, scrapbook 1, box 2, Jacobson Collection OHS.

⁴⁹ “The Picayune,” *Minneapolis Tribune*, February 1909, scrapbook 1, box 2, Jacobson Collection OHS.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Jacobson scrapbook 1, box 2, Jacobson Collection OHS.

⁵² “Promotion for Former Lindsborg Artists,” *Topeka (KS) Daily Capital*, August 24, 1911, scrapbook 1, box 2, Jacobson Collection OHS.

⁵³ Postcard from Oscar B. Jacobson to Birger Sandzén, August 19, 1912, Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ “Exhibition of Student Artist Shows Noteworthy Work,” June 12, 1912, scrapbook 2, box 2, Jacobson Collection OHS.

⁵⁶ “Art Collection,” October 6, 1912, scrapbook 2, box 2, Jacobson Collection OHS.

⁵⁷ “Summer Session, 1912,” *Quarterly Bulletin of the State College of Washington* 4, no. 5 (November 1911), scrapbook 2, box 2, Jacobson Collection OHS.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Lois Des Voignes, “The Next Play,” *Evergreen* (Pullman, WA), February 1912, scrapbook 2, box 2, Jacobson Collection OHS.

⁶² “Scandinavian Club Organized,” *Evergreen*, March 6, 1912, scrapbook 2, box 2, Jacobson Collection OHS.

⁶³ “The Scandinavian Club,” *Evergreen*, March 27, 1912, scrapbook 2, box 2, Jacobson Collection OHS.

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⁶⁴ Melynda Seaton, compiler, "Chronology," in Allbright, Berlo, and White, *A World Unconquered*, 138.

⁶⁵ "Teachers End Romance Here," *Stockholm Review*, August 3, 1912, scrapbook 2, box 2, Jacobson Collection OHS.

⁶⁶ Mark White, email message to author, June 6, 2017.

⁶⁷ "Teachers End Romance Here," *Stockholm Review*, August 3, 1912.

⁶⁸ Oscar B. Jacobson, "Dr. Jacobson Recalls Campus as It Was in 1915," *Oklahoma Daily* (Norman, OK), scrapbook 8, box 7, Jacobson Collection OHS.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ David W. Levy, "University of Oklahoma," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, accessed November 8, 2014, www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=UN010.

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⁷² Eric McCauley Lee and Rim Canaan, *Selected Works: The Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art at the University of Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 11.

⁷³ Oscar B. Jacobson, "Museum of Art," unpublished manuscript, c. 1945, 1, file 52, box J-13, Jacobson Collection WHC.

⁷⁴ Jacobson, "Dr. Jacobson Recalls Campus as It Was in 1915," *Oklahoma Daily*, Jacobson Collection OHS.

⁷⁵ Jacobson, "Museum of Art," 1–2, Jacobson Collection WHC.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Birger Sandzén to Oscar B. Jacobson, January 12, 1916, 1, Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery.

⁷⁸ Jacobson, "Museum of Art," 1–2, Jacobson Collection WHC.

⁷⁹ David W. Levy, "Jacobson Faculty Hall," plaque located in front of the building on the University of Oklahoma campus in Norman, OK.

⁸⁰ Jacobson, "Museum of Art," 1–2, Jacobson Collection WHC.

⁸¹ "Jacobson Lists Views," *Oklahoma Daily*, January 15, 1953, scrapbook 7, box 7, Jacobson Collection OHS.

⁸² Bentley, "Oscar Brousse Jacobson: Western Light."

⁸³ Oscar B. Jacobson, *Superstition Mountains*, 1916.

⁸⁴ Oscar B. Jacobson, "OU Honors Jacobson: A Tribute to an Artist," *Daily Oklahoman*, September 17, 1961, scrapbook 7, box 7, Jacobson Collection OHS.