

PAINTING

Rachel Berenson Perry

AN employee of the Monon Railroad for most of his life, Leroy (Roy) Burton Trobaugh lived for seventy-seven years, seven months, and fourteen days. When he died on 4 September 1955 at the Deer Creek Nursing Home near his hometown of Delphi, Indiana, he left behind a lot on the city's south side, some functional furniture, a few antiques, a 1951 Dodge coupe, and more than 450 oil paintings and sketches created by his own hand.



Traces Magazine
Winter 2001

Wabash at Lockport.

VER PROFIT

THE
CAREER
OF
DELPHI'S
LEROY
TROBAUGH

Trobaugh's accumulation of original artwork presented a problem. According to John Klepinger, Trobaugh's lawyer and trustee of his estate, Trobaugh's will placed the responsibility of dividing the estate on his nieces and nephews. Not one of the relatives, said Klepinger, expressed any interest in owning the artwork. They decided instead to sell the pieces.

A private sale was held at Trobaugh's former home on West Summit Street beginning on 16 October 1955 and continuing every Wednesday and Sunday afternoon for several weeks. At the end of the run, the unsold works were hauled off to Indianapolis for auction. Managed by Skinner Brothers Auction Company, the estate sale took place in the Marble Room of the Marott Hotel on 12 February 1956. Klepinger noted

it was "a terrible winter day" and added, "Not many people from Delphi braved the weather to get there." Instead, strangers bought the pieces, and in less than a day the sum total of one man's artistic life scattered throughout the state and became largely forgotten.

By most accounts Trobaugh was a diffident and modest man. He frequently gave his paintings

to individuals and institutions, including the Delphi Public Library and the town's elementary and high schools. On at least one occasion he used his artistic talent for barter. Alena Sutter, whose husband owned a Delphi automobile dealership in the late 1940s, recalled a time when her husband had just built a new salesroom and needed something to decorate its walls. "Mr. Trobaugh traded two paintings and some cash for the car he wanted," said Sutter. In its obituary for Trobaugh, the *Delphi Journal* said that to him "pictures were for appreciation and for creative art rather than for profit. His work brought him many dollars—\$500 prize awards and many nice prizes—but the cash was to him only a means of providing more materials and opportunities to create." In spite of a lifetime spent drawing and painting, Trobaugh never considered himself a professional artist.

Born on 21 January 1878 in Delphi, Roy Trobaugh was one of two sons of William Trobaugh and his second wife, Elizabeth McCord Trobaugh. Roy and his younger brother Harry had five half-siblings from

their father's first marriage. The community in which the Trobaugh family made its home had been established as the seat of the new county of Carroll in May 1828. When Indiana began construction of the Wabash and Erie Canal in 1832, Delphi's location—situated halfway along the canal's route from Toledo to Evansville—made it a key element in the canal system. Canal construction in Delphi from 1838 to 1840 brought new people and additional prosperity to the area. In 1874, however, the spillway on Deer Creek broke, and the canal lost too much water to allow continued operation south to Lafayette.

When the Hoosier State's canal system deteriorated, railroads established in Indiana in the 1850s soon took over as the dominant mode of transportation. One of the railroads that sprouted up in the state was the Indianapolis, Delphi and Chicago Railway, which officially opened a narrow-gauge road from Delphi to Rensselaer shortly after Roy Trobaugh's birth. In 1881 the Chicago and Indianapolis Air Line Railway purchased the stock of the original company, changed the gauge to a standard size, and extended the road through Delphi from Indianapolis to Chicago. The company soon became part of the Monon Railroad, which in turn became an important part of Trobaugh's life.

Although no records exist regarding Trobaugh's high school career, he undoubtedly displayed a serious interest in art. After high school he traveled to New York City and enrolled in the Art Students League on 1 October 1901. New York must have been an astounding change for a young man raised in rural Indiana. In the early 1900s cities were growing radically. At the time of the Civil War one out of six Americans lived in a city with a population of eight thousand or more. By 1900 the proportion had increased to one out of every three.

When Trobaugh arrived in New York to pursue his career, the art world was on the brink of exploring social realism and urban imagery. In 1900 the Art Students League was celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary as a student-established school. Almost a thousand students, including many women, were enrolled. The school, under the leadership of Professor Lemuel Wilmarth, fostered an environment more open to innovation than other art schools in the city.

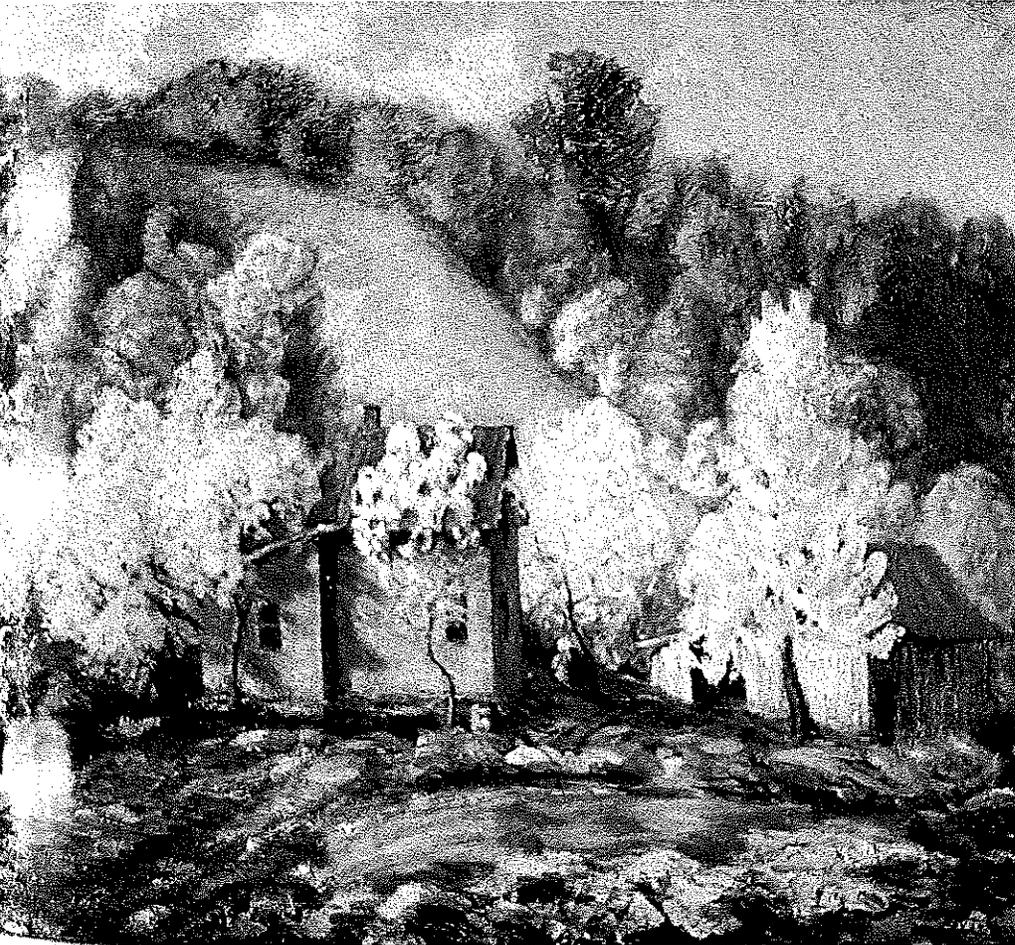
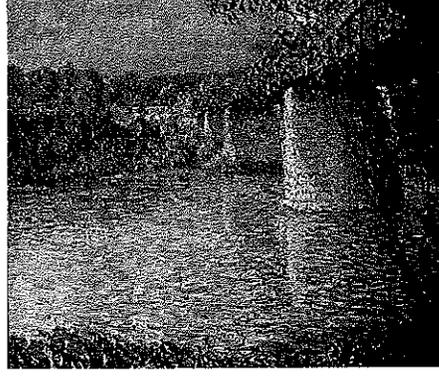
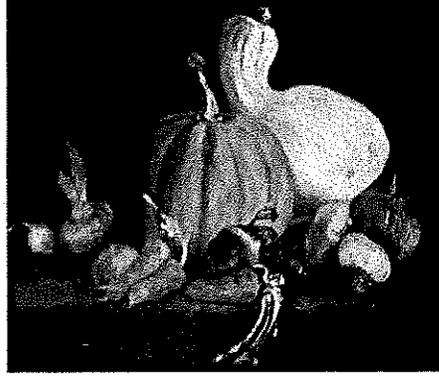
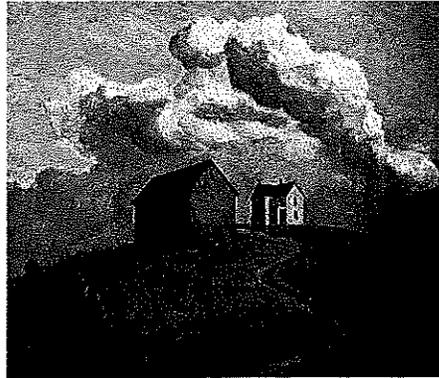
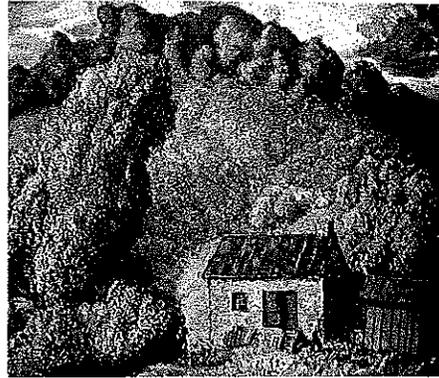
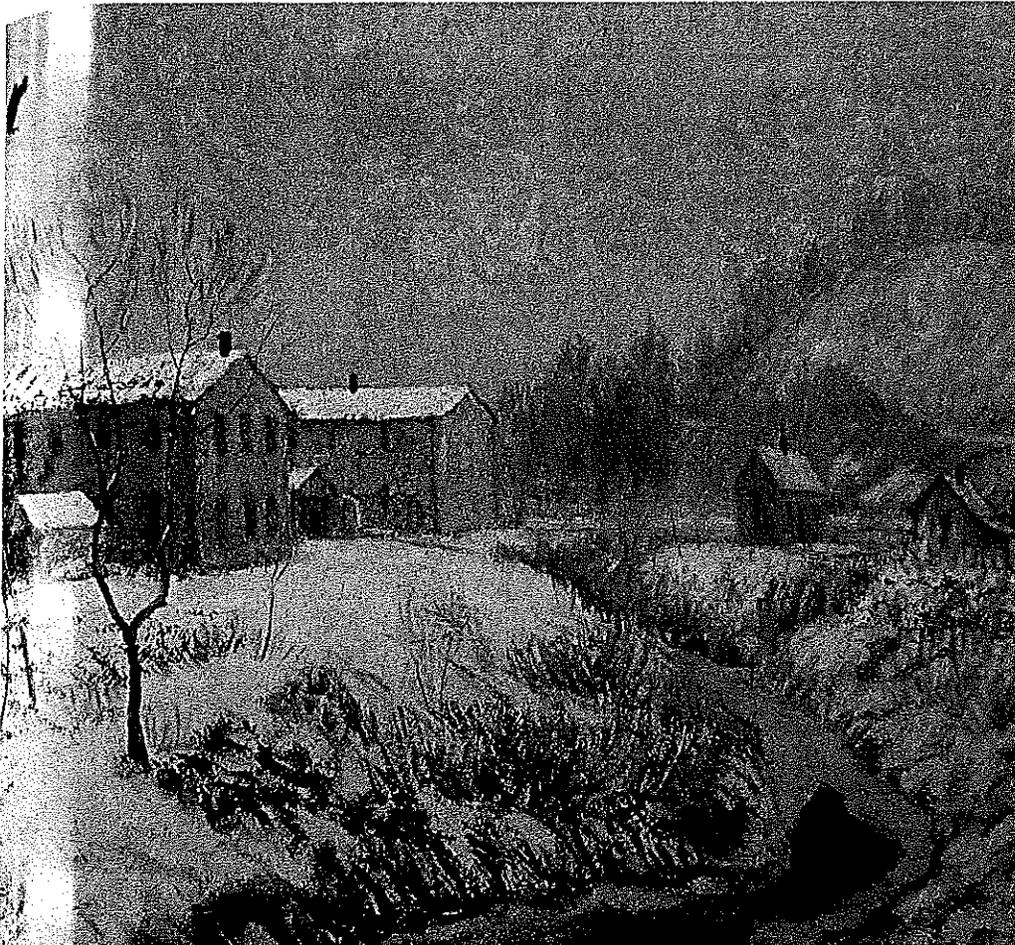
Located on West Fifty-seventh Street between Broadway and Seventh Avenue, the League's building occupied more than eleven thousand square feet. In

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: *Pittsburg Snow Scene, Tennessee Shack, fall trees, Breeze Hill, Harvest Time, Wabash River at Pittsburg with Wagon Bridge, Carrollton Hill.*



CARROLL COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Leroy Trobaugh, circa 1900.



CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: GEORGE W. OHEAR; DESS AND BONNIE HORN; WILLIAM J. AND FLORENCE ANNE BRIGGS; HILLCREST ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, DELPHI; PRIVATE COLLECTION; GEORGE W. OHEAR; PRIVATE COLLECTION

addition to galleries and studio space, it contained a library, a collection of recognized artworks to use as examples, and a store that sold art materials at cost to enrolled artists. Students were involved in the institution's decisions about curriculum, regulations, and staff, and with an instructor's consent they were allowed to enter any class.

From the time of his enrollment in the League until 1 April 1902, Trobaugh took classes in sketching, illustrating, and painting from live models. His instructors included such recognized names in the art world as Kenyon Cox, Charles C. Curran, H. Siddons Mowbray, Benjamin West Clinedinst, and Frederick Dielman. Cox, perhaps the best known of the educators, used an especially interesting method to develop his students' memorization and analytical skills. He often conducted class on one floor and placed models on another, forcing the students to walk between rooms until they were able to recall enough features to create detailed paintings.

Although Indiana lore maintains that Trobaugh studied with famed impressionist John H. Twachtman, there is no evidence that he formally enrolled in Twachtman's class or studied with him in Gloucester, Massachusetts. In light of the predominance of landscapes in his later work, however, it is likely he was exposed to some of the methods and philosophies promoted by landscape instructors such as Twachtman and Childe Hassam.

Because Trobaugh left behind no written account of his thoughts or reflections, it is impossible to know what reasons led to his departure from the Art Students League in the spring of 1902. What is known is that Trobaugh returned to Delphi where, except for several holiday excursions, he remained for the rest of his life. The young man might have discovered that the north-central Indiana town could not support a professional artist, or he might have concluded, after instruction with many other dedicated art students, that he did not possess the talent or commitment necessary to pursue an artist's life. Whatever his reasons, upon his return to Delphi he took a job with the Monon Railroad.

Trobaugh dedicated his life to the Monon. For forty years he spent most of his time at the station, performing the duties of an agent in addition to operating the telegraph. The station was a hub of activity, serving passengers and freight traveling between Chicago and Indianapolis. As was the case with agents in most small stations, Trobaugh had many duties. He copied train orders and gave official messages to trains for logistical coordination, worked the interlocking mechanism to allow only one train at a time on the

track, sold tickets to passengers, and processed paperwork for the transfer of freight.

Perhaps because of the visual retention training he received in Cox's class, Trobaugh gained a local reputation for his memory. Klepinger described how Trobaugh applied his skill at work. "As a local agent for the Monon Railroad," Klepinger said, "he had to pass a lot of information on. After a train passed, Trobaugh could remember every car, where it was from, and what it carried, even if the train was one hundred cars long. He never took out a piece of paper to record this. It was said that he had a photographic memory."

Even with his numerous responsibilities at the station, Trobaugh managed to set aside time to paint. In fact, he painted with the same diligence with which he maintained his railroad job. After his return from New York City in 1902, Trobaugh created small watercolor sketches then followed them with larger oils on canvas. He did not use photographs as guides, preferring instead to paint still-life arrangements in the studio and landscapes on site. Although there is no evidence of post-New York formal training, Trobaugh continued to challenge himself and grow as an artist, investigating a wide variety of subjects using watercolor and oils.

A lifelong bachelor, Trobaugh spent the majority of his free time painting, framing (he made his own frames), and traveling to attractive painting spots. He received as a fringe benefit from the railroad a travel pass that allowed him to ride company trains free of charge. He could also obtain special "trip passes" for free transportation on railroads not owned by his employer. Two artist friends, Herb Smith and Harry Milroy, sometimes accompanied Trobaugh on painting expeditions. A neighbor, Gladys Griffith Pearson, also painted with him. "He loved color so he used mostly the three primary colors," she said. "He never copied any picture. All were from real subjects, and he didn't do much in detail."

Railroad passes gave Trobaugh the opportunity to travel throughout the United States. He took at least three trips west—in 1926, 1941, and 1950—and several excursions to the Blue Ridge Mountains in the early 1930s. He also tried his hand at marine paintings on the East Coast in 1938, 1947, and 1952. In addition, he and his easel were a common sight in Brown County, Indiana. On one of his trips west, according to the *Delphi Journal*, Trobaugh was accompanied by four other artists. "They had agreed that they would choose 45 different scenes, each painting his own version of what he saw," the newspaper reported. "At least three of those series of 45 pictures hang unbroken in prominent places. Trobaugh, however, in character-



FROM HISTORICAL ATLAS OF CARROLL COUNTY, IOWA, BY R. THOMAS MAHILL AND MARGARET MAHILL

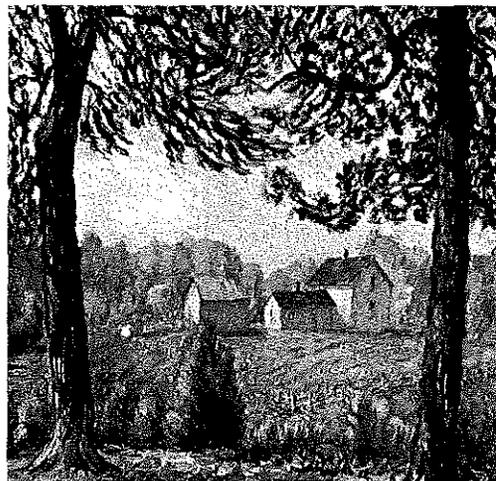
Trobaugh (second from left) gathers with relatives in Delphi. Also sitting for the photograph are several of Trobaugh's half-siblings, his mother Elizabeth (fifth from left), and his father William (third from right).

*The COMMUNITY in which the
Trobaugh family made its home had been
established as THE SEAT OF THE
NEW COUNTY of Carroll in May
1828. . . . Canal construction in Delphi from
1838 to 1840 brought NEW PEOPLE
and ADDITIONAL
PROSPERITY to the area.*



DELPHI PUBLIC LIBRARY

ABOVE: Creek with fall trees. BELOW: Untitled landscape.

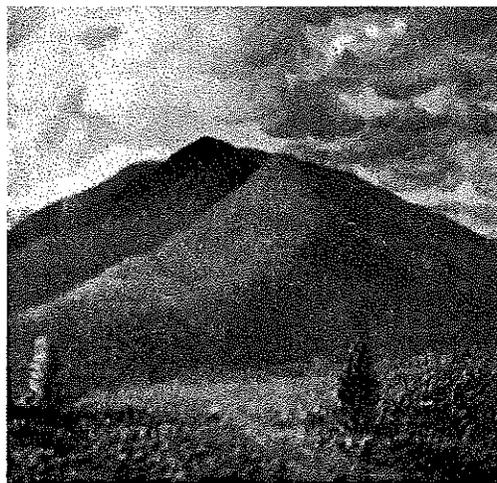


PRIVATE COLLECTION



PRIVATE COLLECTION

Above: Western canyon. Below: Blue Mountain.



PRIVATE COLLECTION



COURTESY MINE GRUFFY

istic manner, broke his series because a friend liked and wanted one particular picture.”

Trobaugh’s confidence grew along with his painting experience, and he took advantage of regional exhibition opportunities. The Indiana Art Association exhibited two of his paintings: *Fisherman’s Houseboat* in 1916 and *Hilltop Field* in 1917. In 1925 his paintings *October Day* and *Midwinter on Deer Creek* were part of the first Hoosier Salon, held in the galleries of Chicago’s Marshall Field and Company. Also in 1925 his landscape *Valley Field* joined others from Brown County in an exhibition held at the art department of Columbus Public High School. And in spite of controversy about allowing out-of-county artists to participate, the Brown County Art Gallery invited Trobaugh to exhibit his work beginning in 1928.

Trobaugh continued to gain stature over the years with the acceptance of his paintings in sixteen juried Hoosier Salon annual exhibitions between 1926 and 1954. His landscape *The Foot Bridge* won an honorable

mention in the 1937 Hoosier Salon, and *Indian Craft* won the still-life merit award at the 1944 salon, held at the William H. Block Company in Indianapolis. That same year Trobaugh also exhibited two paintings, *Evening, Ohio River* and *Indian Craft, No. 2*, at the Indiana Artists’ Club exhibition at Indianapolis’s L. S. Ayres and Company. “Roy Trobaugh catches the glory of late sunlight as it is reflected from a large industrial barge, launched in the foreground by the level bank of the Ohio,” wrote *Indianapolis Star* art critic Lucille Morehouse. “The blue mass of water is unbroken by a ripple. . . . Mr. Trobaugh has gained in versatility and skill of workmanship after many years of experimentation.”

Although many lost their jobs in the Great Depression, Trobaugh remained working at the Monon station. Never one to squander art supplies, he became noted for his frugality. Bob McCain, a friend

Trobaugh paints in his studio in the 1950s. Trobaugh’s friend Herb Smith took this photograph and from it created a painting that now hangs in the Carroll County Museum.

of Trobaugh, claimed that Trobaugh boiled his painted canvases with turpentine to use them over again. During the 1930s Trobaugh rendered many landscapes close to home in Carroll and Brown Counties and spent summer vacations from 1931 through 1934 in Tennessee.

His job at the Monon station made Trobaugh a well-known figure in the community, but many Delphi residents remember him as a shy and retiring individual. Trobaugh lived most of his adult life at 424 West Summit Street and worked out of a second-floor studio in the barn/garage located behind the house. Neighborhood children often stopped by to satisfy their curiosity. Dave Williams, who grew up next door to Trobaugh, recalled, "He never had a great deal to say. The one thing I remember about his studio was a half-glass door. On it was painted a gruff old man with a beard and an open mouth. The mouth was used as a peep hole to look in or out."

One of Trobaugh's closest friends, Herb Smith, worked in the family grocery business in Delphi before opening his own appliance and furniture store on the northeast corner of Washington and Main Streets. Smith became interested in photography, opened a studio in the early 1930s, and pursued a career in professional photography for fifty years. A painting by Smith, rendered from Smith's photograph of Trobaugh at his studio easel in the early 1950s, hangs in the Carroll County Museum. Delphi lawyer George Obear remembered: "Roy was always kind of shy and pretty sensitive. He and Herb were good friends. Roy gave a painting to Herb and hung it in Herb's studio. One day Herb took Roy's painting down to move it to another location. He had it propped up against the wall. Roy came in and saw the painting on the floor so he took it home."

Trobaugh purchased a Dodge coupe in 1948 and used its ample trunk to haul his painting equipment. Between his treks he organized an exhibition in Indianapolis with fellow Hoosier artist Evelynne Mess. An article in the 21 March 1948 *Indianapolis Star* noted, "In his [Trobaugh's] group of seven large oils he made a well-balanced selection that includes landscapes in far-distant parts of the United States—mountain, coast scene and woodland and creek scenes nearer home." In 1949 Trobaugh's painting *Wedgewood Ware and Churny Lace* won the Hoosier Salon's still-life merit award. His work was included in a Hoosier Salon twenty-fifth anniversary exhibition that traveled to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. The exhibition,

according to the *Indianapolis News*, marked the "first time the Washington museum has given space to an exhibition representing one state exclusively and will give eastern critics an insight into Indiana's expression of regional art."

On his excursions west Trobaugh took an interest in Native American crafts, and in 1944 he began to arrange pottery and rug designs as still-life subjects. Ten years later his painting *Indian Craft Design* became the last of his works to be accepted in a Hoosier Salon. "In my early years as The Star's art critic," Morehouse once noted, "Roy Trobaugh of Delphi exhibited landscapes that resembled incendiary work with prairie fires. The early series has been succeeded by various subjects—always with marked development—and, for a few years, Mr. Trobaugh has contributed unusual still-life designs, with interest centered on rare pottery and other craft work."

Looking back at Trobaugh's career reveals an artist who worked in a variety of styles and subjects. Using techniques ranging from the Brown County impressionist school to the regionalist style of the 1930s, Trobaugh experimented and changed throughout his life. His explosive brushwork, vibrant colors, and occasionally skewed perspective reveal an approach uninhibited by extensive academic training or the desire to produce salable work. Unlike those who go through life regretting missed opportunities to fully develop a creative talent, the Delphi artist managed to fulfill his duties as a railroad agent while pursuing his passion in the free time that remained. Unfettered by the triumphs and resulting deference to success, Trobaugh painted wherever and whatever he chose, adhering solely to his own ethics about painting from life and using his own ideas.

Rachel Berenson Perry is the assistant director of historic sites for the Indiana Department of Natural Resources's Division of Museum and Historic Sites. She organized the exhibition Leroy Trobaugh: The Paintings of a Railroad Worker, which will appear at the Indiana State Museum, 202 N. Alabama St., Indianapolis, from Saturday, 10 February, through Sunday, 3 June.



CARROLL COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

During the 1930s Trobaugh painted with other members of the Delphi Art Club. "If asked for suggestions," noted one of the club's exhibition catalogs, "he was always rather vague. He stressed using your own Ideas, and never to copy."

FOR FURTHER READING Burnet, Mary Q. *Art and Artists of Indiana*. New York: The Century Co., 1921. | Davidson, Abraham A. *The Story of American Painting*. New York: H. N. Abrams, 1974. | Newton, Judith Vale, and Carol Weiss. *A Grand Tradition: The Art and Artists of the Hoosier Salon, 1925-1990*. Indianapolis: Hoosier Salon Patrons Association, 1993.