

Four Seasons on an Iowa Farm

The Paintings of Robert Tabor

by Roy R. Behrens

The Great Depression began in the United States with a devastating stock market crash on October 24, 1929, the infamous day known as "Black Thursday." Thousands of people lost everything, and in the aftermath, homes and farms were repossessed, banks failed, and as companies cut back or went out of business altogether, millions of Americans became unemployed.

As poverty increased, the homeless resorted to living in shacks (in shantytowns called "Hoovervilles") and were fed in soup lines. Advised that capitalism was self-correcting, President Herbert Hoover intervened slowly and reluctantly, with the result that he lost by a landslide in the 1932 presidential election to Franklin Delano Roose-

velt, the exuberant New York governor, who promised a "new deal" for the American people. "The only thing we have to fear," said FDR at his first inauguration, "is fear itself."

Within the first few months of Roosevelt's administration, he ended the prohibition of alcohol, shifted responsibility for aiding the poor from the states to the federal government, and set the stage for what would become eventually a cluster of regulatory and public works programs, among them the National Recovery Administration (NRA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). He also set up agencies through which jobless artists were hired by the federal government

to work on public art projects, including the Public Works of Art Project, the Treasury Relief Art Project, and later, the Works Progress Administration's federal art, music, theater, and writers' projects.

In 1933, just as some of these programs were being established, in the small midwestern community of Independence, Iowa, Robert Byron Tabor (1882-1972) lost his job as a traveling salesman for a Cedar Rapids paint company. Married with three children, the 51-year-old Tabor had worked in his earlier years in a local drugstore that was owned by his family. He had also dabbled in photography, and later claimed in a newspaper interview in the *Oelwein Daily Register* that he had invented



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This portrait of Robert B. Tabor (c. 1935) was photographed by Dwight Schneider, one of Tabor's friends and a studio photographer in Oelwein, Iowa.

"the first three-dimensional slides," and, prior to World War I, a "system of visual education" for which he had "exclusive rights from big publishing houses and endorsements of state boards of education" but "then the war blew it all up!"

Tabor had never studied art, but he had once visited the Art Institute of Chicago and had occasionally looked at portfolios at the Independence Public Library, where his sister, Neva Tabor, was the

librarian. He may have visited the Art Institute in 1930, the year in which a painting by a fellow Iowan, *American Gothic* by Cedar Rapids artist Grant Wood, was awarded a prestigious bronze medal at that museum and eventually became one of its most popular attractions.

Perhaps it was during that same visit that Tabor purchased a reproduction of another work in the Art Institute's collection, a seascape by Winslow Homer titled

The Herring Net (1885). It was that framed reproduction that was damaged beyond repair when it fell off a nail in the living room wall of Tabor's home in 1933, while he was out job searching. Disturbed by the vacant, conspicuous spot that remained on the wallpaper, Tabor decided that, regardless of his complete lack of artistic training, he should replace the Homer reproduction with a painting of his own, a proposal his family responded to (as Tabor recalled) with "zero enthusiasm."

A few days later, when he ran across some old oil paints and a scrap of canvas, he took up painting for the first time. "That canvas was never hung," he recalled later, "nor were the ones that followed. One by one they all met the same



fate, the trash can." But the distraction of painting was a therapeutic godsend for Tabor, as his family realized, and he remembered that "they would encourage me by telling me how good I was getting."

In December of that year, Tabor's wife Ruth saw a newspaper article announcing the formation of the Public Works of Art Project. A nationwide assistance plan, the PWAP was a six-month program that provided jobs for nearly 4,000 unemployed American artists, who were paid from \$26.50 to \$42.50 per week in the decoration of public buildings and parks. In addition to financial need, applicants had to prove their artistic ability when applying to each state's program director. The PWAP director in Iowa was Grant Wood.

At his wife's urging, Tabor reluctantly applied to the program,

but when he showed Wood his paintings, he was promptly rejected. Nevertheless, their conversation continued, and, as Tabor recounted the story, Wood eventually gave in: "Mr. Tabor, it's against my better judgment," he said, "but I will try you on one easel piece [during an employment period of one month]. If it is not up to standard however, we will be forced to drop you. I simply can't turn anyone down in times like these."

A month later, Tabor delivered a finished painting titled *Vendue*, which depicted the sale of an Iowa farm. Admired as much for its timely subject matter as for its formal qualities, the painting (the original of which has since been lost) not only qualified Tabor to participate in the arts assistance program, it also brought him national recognition.

Entered in a government-

Robert Tabor, *Postman in Snow* (1938, oil on board)

As part of the Works Progress Administration, Tabor was commissioned to paint this mural for the U.S. Post Office in Independence, Iowa, where it still hangs.

sponsored competition with 15,000 other artworks, his painting was one of 600 that were chosen for an exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., in May 1934. The exhibition was viewed by President and Mrs. Roosevelt, who selected a number of works for display in the White House. Tabor's painting was among those chosen, and, although it was never listed as White House property, it may have remained there until the late 1940s or early 1950s.

As Tabor realized, the provocative theme of the painting

was one of the chief reasons for its popularity. Years later, in the October 1956 issue of *Coronet* magazine, in an article titled "The Vendue Story," he credited Joseph McGrady, a blind physician and farm manager from Independence, with advising him to use a bank's foreclosure on a farm as the subject and with providing the enigmatic French title, a term that alludes to both traitors and sales. "You are going to tell our government," McGrady urged him, as Tabor recalled, "from the President down, the tragic condition of the Midwest. You are going to paint a farm sale. That epitomizes it all. Iowa today is just one big farm sale."

A year after the exhibition, according to Tabor, he received a letter from someone in the Roosevelt administration, telling him that the painting had "played its part in crystallizing government policy during a great national crisis." Even more notable for the aspiring middle-aged artist, his painting was rated "by eastern critics" as among the top 25 pieces in the Corcoran exhibition, by the *New York Times* as one of the top three, and by the director of the Museum of Modern Art (where it was also apparently shown) as "among the finest and most sensitive in the show."

Propelled by such sudden dramatic success, Robert Tabor continued to paint for the remaining four decades of his life. Soon after the completion of *Vendue*, he was commissioned by the government (as part of the Works Progress Administration) to paint a mural for the new U.S. Post Office in Independence, where it still hangs. Titled *Postman in Snow*, it portrays the torturous wintry trek of a local mail carrier named Warren Sackett as he delivers the mail in an Iowa blizzard.

In 1934, inspired perhaps by the vivid detail of Sinclair Lewis's novel *Main Street* (1920), a best-selling exposé of small-town midwestern life, and in advance of Grant Wood's illustrations for a new edition of that book (1937), Tabor created his own interpretation of the same subject, in which he recorded the characters at "the bank corner" at the intersection of Main Street and Highway 150 in Independence (looking west, toward the Farmer's State Bank). His painting, also titled *Main Street*, was reproduced by the *New York Times* as an illustration in its Sunday magazine section, and is now on permanent display at the Independence Public Library.

In the years following World War II, Tabor supported himself by working at the Iowa State Liquor Store in Independence. It was not until the early 1950s that he received his only major art commission, aside from his earlier government work. Clark Swan, the owner of a local furniture store, offered Tabor \$1,200 to create a series of paintings about aspects of life on an Iowa farm. Titled *The Four Seasons*, these paintings (which are large when compared to his earlier work) were exhibited for several years in the banquet room of the Hotel Pinicon in Independence. A few years later they were acquired by Lane Insurance Company for its office on Main Street, where they could be easily viewed from the street through the storefront windows for many years. Owned

by Edna Lane Shain of Vinton, Iowa, these four paintings by Tabor (which may be his finest, most genuine works), along with five preparatory watercolor sketches, are on extended loan and can be seen at the Senior Citizens' Center in Independence.

In 1962, nearly 30 years after the earth's gravity had pulled his Winslow Homer down and launched Tabor's artistic career, he offered to commemorate the discoveries of another Iowa-born adventurer, University of Iowa astrophysicist James Van Allen. He met with the celebrated scientist and his three associates, and, working from photographs (as he characteristically did), he tried to reconstruct the "moment of discovery" in 1958 when they found that the earth is surrounded, out-

(Text continues on page 48)

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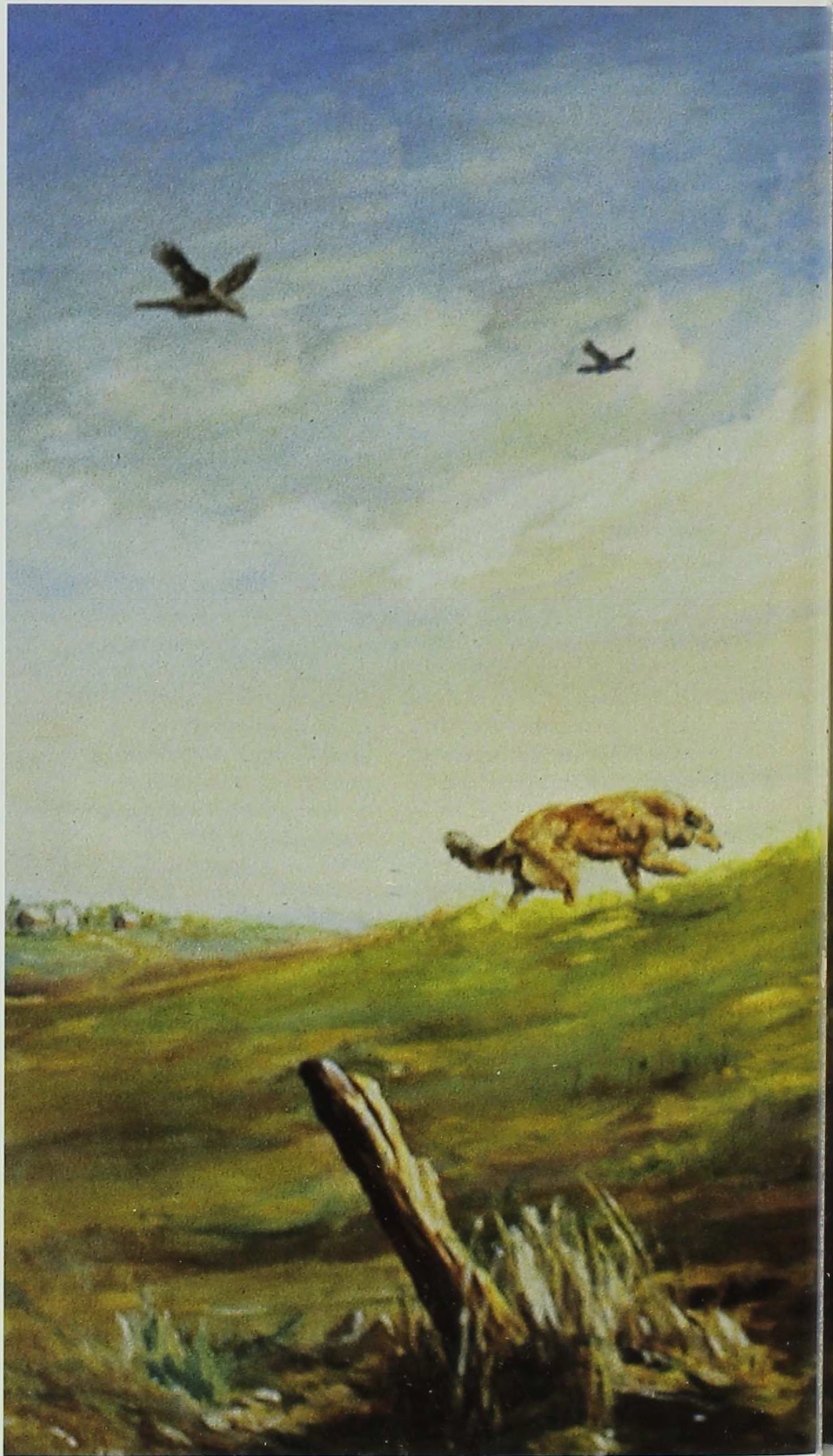


Robert Tabor, Untitled [study for Spring]
(c. 1951-1953, watercolor, 14 1/2" x 19", collection of Edna Lane Shain)

Long before he took up painting, Tabor had been a photographer, and many of his paintings were composed by recombining features of several photographs, the glass negatives for some of which still exist in the collection of the Buchanan County Historical Society. Before starting on the final oil painting (next page), he prepared small watercolor studies such as this one.

Robert Tabor, *Spring*
(c. 1951-1953, oil on board, 32"x47",
collection of Edna Lane Shain)

Tabor's paintings of the four seasons on an Iowa farm, as he explained in exhibition notes in 1958, "were two years in the painting and I traveled about 1500 to 2000 miles in getting the material. The idea was not merely to catch farm scenes, but more to catch the spirit of the farm in the different seasons of the year." The model for this painting, Tabor remembered, "was an old guy I hired at Galena, Kansas, to take the old corn planter to drive around hour after hour over a little knoll until I caught the feeling."





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While planning this painting, wrote Tabor, "I went to Galena, Kansas, where I found a fellow to model for the figure of the man with the jug, and I got a girl at Kiowa, Kansas, to model [for] the girl. The second man I sketched just as he was coming out of the harvest field in Kansas."



Robert Tabor, *Untitled [study for Summer]*
(c. 1951-1953, watercolor, 18 1/2" x 23 1/2", collection
of Edna Lane Shain)



Robert Tabor, *Untitled [study for Summer]*
(c. 1951-1953, watercolor, 14 1/2" x 19", collection
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Robert Tabor, *Autumn*
(c. 1951-1953, oil on board, 36" x 48",
collection of Edna Lane Shain)

"The idea for this picture," recalled Tabor, "originated on a farm in the western part of the state [of Iowa]—the Roy Swain farm. I stayed there for a couple of weeks in order to absorb the atmosphere. Swain posed with his team as the principle subject of the picture. The other parts of the picture were taken from the Buchanan County scenery."



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Robert Tabor, *Winter*
 (c. 1951-1953, oil on board, 32"x47",
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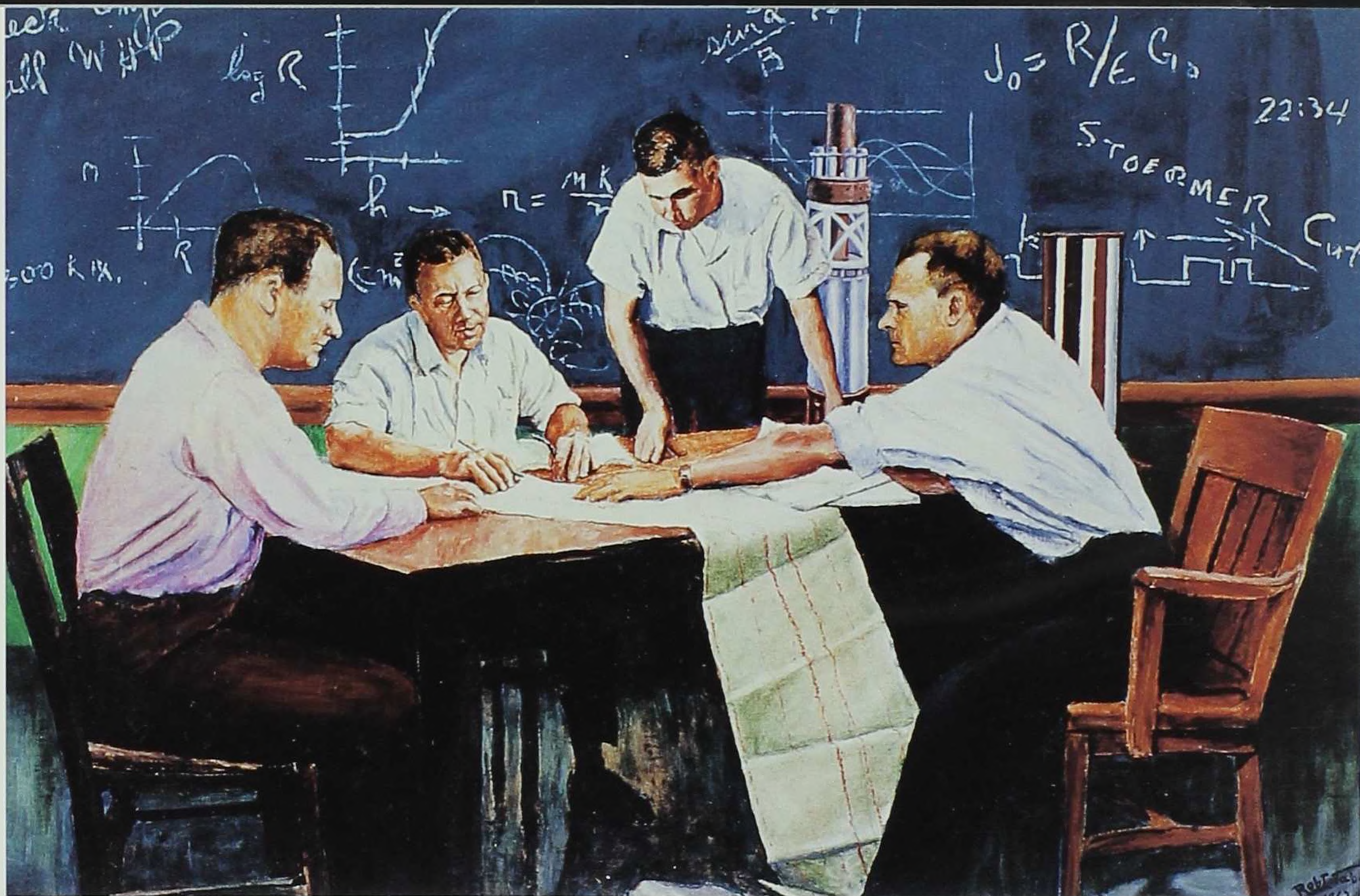
Glen Hamlin, a Tabor relative, posed for the figure in this painting, which "was pieced together from several Iowa barns," Tabor recounted, "but the endeavor on that was trying to catch the cold and bleakness in mid winter just as in the harvest trying to catch the heat and sweat feeling."





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COURTESY JAMES VAN ALLEN

Robert Tabor, *Discovery* (1962, oil on board)

In Tabor's last significant painting, the Iowa-born astrophysicist James A. Van Allen and three of his co-workers (left to right, Carl E. McIlwain, Van Allen, George H. Ludwig, and Ernest C. Ray) at the University of Iowa are shown at the moment they realized in 1958 that the earth is surrounded by zones of radiation, called Van Allen radiation belts. Tabor's painting now hangs in the Physics Library of Van Allen Hall at the University of Iowa, in Iowa City.

side its atmosphere, by what came to be known as the Van Allen radiation belts. Van Allen remembers that Tabor was "a low-key and very modest individual but had a nice sense of composition in arranging his subjects. He took many photographs [as he planned the painting] but did no actual sketching on the scene."

Ten years later, Tabor died at age 90. Throughout his life, there was never a shortage of local acclaim for his artistic abilities, in Independence and Oelwein, Iowa, and in Olathe and Kiowa, Kansas, where he lived out his final years with his two daughters.

Looking back, it is a sad irony that while *Vendue* was one of

Tabor's earliest efforts, it may also have been his crowning achievement. Swept along on the coattails of the American Regionalists, his best work was never the equal of that of Grant Wood, John Steuart Curry, and Thomas Hart Benton, and as the interest in Regionalism faded among art critics and collectors, so did Robert Tabor's dream of national prominence. ❖

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NOTE ON SOURCES

For help in preparing this essay, the author is grateful to Edna Lane Shain, Ed Tabor, Anna Beatty, James Tabor Hamlin, Judge William G. and Mary Klotzbach, Richard and Kay Leet, James Van Allen, Todd Kimm, Jessica Sumer Walters, the Buchanan County Historical Society, the White House, and the State Historical Society of Iowa. Of particular value were the efforts of Mary Huber, Director of the James & Meryl Hearst Center for the Arts in Cedar Falls, where an exhibition of Tabor's paintings was held in the Dresser-Robins Gallery (Jan. 5-April 11, 1999). This research was supported in part by funding from the Graduate College at the University of Northern Iowa.

Unless otherwise noted, all quotes by or about Tabor are from a lengthy two-part article and interview by L. A. Warren in the *Oelwein [Iowa] Daily Register*: "Robt. Tabor Painting Depicts Van Allen, Associates Discovering Radiation Belt" (Sept. 26, 1962), pp. 1-2; and "Vendue Skyrocketed Tabor to National Fame" (Sept. 27, 1962), pp. 1, 6. Tabor's descriptions of his *Four Seasons* paintings (quoted in the illustration captions) are from mimeographed notes he prepared for a display of his drawings and paintings at the Lane Insurance Company in Independence on September 13, 1958. For additional information, see John Reynolds, "Tabor Puts Home Town on Canvas," *Cedar Rapids Gazette* (Nov. 29, 1953), pp. 1-2; and Dave Rasdal, "Ramblin'" column, "'30s Artist Finds Audience," *Cedar Rapids Gazette* (Feb. 7, 1999), pp. 13A and 24A.

Tabor's original paintings are on public display at the following locations in Independence: *The Four Seasons* (four oil paintings and five watercolor studies) at the Independence Senior Center, 400 5th Avenue NE (319-334-7011); *Main Street* at the Independence Public Library, 210 2nd Street NE (319-334-2470); and *Postman in Snow* at the Independence Post Office, 200 2nd Avenue NE (319-334-2495).