



Spring 3-29-2017

The Legacy of “Old Osawatomie”: John Brown in Art and Memory

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Bilger, Ryan, "The Legacy of “Old Osawatomie”: John Brown in Art and Memory" (2017). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 244.

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Abstract

This, of course, is no deity, but rather John Brown, a man who received many appellations both during and after his lifetime. Abolitionist. Murderer. Freedom fighter. Terrorist. And this picture is known as *Tragic Prelude*, painted by the American regionalist artist John Steuart Curry. A native of Kansas, Curry received a commission from Governor Walter Huxman in the late 1930s to paint a series of murals depicting the state's history for the Kansas State Capitol Building. Other scenes in the mural cycle included depictions of the explorer Francisco Coronado and Padre Padilla, but the most recent scene, as well as the largest, portrayed John Brown.

Keywords

Art History, John Brown, Memory, Ryan Bilger

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

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This blog post originally appeared in The Gettysburg Compiler and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

The Legacy of “Old Osawatomie”: John Brown in Art and Memory

By [Ryan Bilger '19](#)

Have you seen this man before?



Tragic Prelude (1940) by John Steuart Curry. Located in the east wing of the 2nd floor rotunda in the Kansas State Capitol Building. Via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

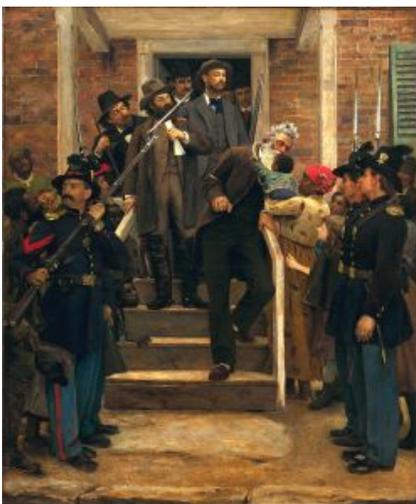
Perhaps you have, and perhaps you’ve already thought a bit about him and what he represents to you. But if you have not, take a moment and just look at him, and consider the question I have raised. What emotions does this painting, showing a man towering over other figures and a landscape like a god stir up in you?

This, of course, is no deity, but rather John Brown, a man who received many appellations both during and after his lifetime. Abolitionist. Murderer. Freedom fighter. Terrorist. And this picture is known as *Tragic Prelude*, painted by the American regionalist artist John Steuart Curry. A native of Kansas, Curry received a commission from Governor Walter Huxman in the late 1930s to paint a series of murals depicting

the state's history for the Kansas State Capitol Building. Other scenes in the mural cycle included depictions of the explorer Francisco Coronado and Padre Padilla, but the most recent scene, as well as the largest, portrayed John Brown.

Curry recognized the significance of John Brown's actions to the history of Kansas, even though the abolitionist only spent a small portion of his life in the state. The painter wrote that his intent for this mural was to channel "the fratricidal fury that first flamed on the plains of Kansas, the tragic prelude to the last bloody feud of the English-speaking people." The tornado in the background accentuates this point, playing on Brown's nickname as the "Cyclone of Kansas." He is portrayed as a dominating, terrifying figure, just as Curry intended. He wrote "I portray John Brown as a bloodthirsty, godfearing fanatic," a member of a dangerous class of "do-gooders" who actually did more harm through their actions. He said "To try to 'wreak good' is the quickest way to make people mad" and "I think [Brown] is the prototype of a great many Kansans. Some one described a Kansan as one who went about reeking [sic] good on humanity." Curry looked back on the legacy of Brown and drew his observations forward to the future. By portraying Brown as vengefully as he did, he made a strong, and perhaps pessimistic, statement about the power of man to do good as opposed to merely complicating and worsening matters. Curry left his *Tragic Prelude* believing it was "the greatest painting I have yet done."

Yet, other depictions of John Brown did not portray the man as the terrifying, wrathful figure seen in Curry's work. Perhaps the best-known painting of a benevolent Brown is Thomas Hovenden's *The Last Moments of John Brown* (1882-1884). Born in 1840, Hovenden was an Irish immigrant who originally settled in New York City before moving to the Philadelphia area later in life, where he made his painting of Brown. Unlike Curry, Hovenden received his schooling in the French academic tradition of painting, giving his style a greater elegance and sense of composure.



The Last Moments of John Brown (1884) by Thomas Hovenden. Currently located in Gallery 762 at The Met Fifth Avenue. Via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Hovenden received the commission for *The Last Moments of John Brown* from Robbins Battell, a philanthropist and manufacturer based in New York and Connecticut. The plan for the painting would fit well into the academic tradition of “history paintings,” which often portrayed famous scenes from the past or from mythological works on a grand scale. Artists and patrons alike considered the genre to be the most important type of painting, with such commissions only going to the best artists. Battell’s desire for the picture was for it to immortalize a moment related in an 1859 account in the *New York Tribune* of Brown’s execution and further promoted in a poem by John Greenleaf Whittier. The story went that, on his way to the scaffold, Brown stopped to kiss a young black child, in one final act of compassion before his death. The patron wrote to Hovenden that “[I]t has probably occurred to you that you might represent the child in its mother’s arms, extending one or both of its little hands toward the man, with a wistful look which he pleasantly recognizes, and is about to kiss it.”

Hovenden, apparently, had his reservations about depicting the scene, mostly related to concerns about the event’s authenticity. Battell sent him an excerpt from the *New York Tribune* article, which assuaged his fears enough to enable him to move on with the painting. Ironically enough, years after the painting’s completion, the article’s attributed author, Edward H. House, admitted that he had not written the article, nor even been in Charles Town to witness the hanging. Rather, the article had been cobbled together by multiple other writers, and the story of Brown and the child was a lie.

Based as it was in this false tale, Hovenden’s *Last Moments of John Brown* provides a much more sympathetic view of the abolitionist than that presented in Curry’s painting. The canvas itself is huge, stretching over six feet tall, giving it a monumentality akin to the Curry mural. Brown has a noose already around his neck, an omen of his fate. The two sets of soldiers on the sides, shown in authentic dress based on Hovenden’s exhaustive research, funnel the viewer’s attention towards the center, where Brown leans over to give the famous kiss. This painting shows none of the righteous furor of the *Tragic Prelude*, instead giving the abolitionist a sense of grace and dignity as he walks towards his death. *The Last Moments of John Brown* illustrates a far different view of John Brown than the one seen in the Kansas State House.

Hovenden’s painting received a mixture of praise and criticism, much of it deriving from the polarizing nature of its subject matter. One critic wrote of it as a great American history painting, stating “[M]r. Hovenden might have painted [SAVONAROLA](#) going forth to his death with all the technique and masterly spirit that he painted JOHN BROWN, but it would not have been so important a picture.” Another critic, commenting on the painting’s emotional qualities, wrote “there is something more than curiosity...in all those upturned faces...something, for the moment, of tender admiration and of respectful sympathy.” Others, though, took issue with the seemingly reserved nature of the figures in the painting; they lack the wild emotions of, for example, those in a Caravaggio painting. And, of course, the question of the authenticity of the story of the kiss also negatively influenced people’s perceptions of Hovenden’s work. Yet, the

painting has remained in the American lexicon, joining Curry's portrayal as one of the most famous images of the walking controversy that was John Brown.

Editor's Note: A previous version of this article identified the place of Brown's execution as Charleston, rather than Charles Town.

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