Frank Lundahl (1858-1932) was a Swedish-American artist born in Rock Island. A painter of interior murals by trade, his works in Augustana's collections focus on the world around him, calling our attention to the everyday beauty of our region, this place we call home.

Lundahl trained under Lars Axel Blombergson (1841-1879), a painter from Söderhamn, Sweden who immigrated to Moline. He later studied at what is now the Art Institute of Chicago, either when it was the Academy of Design (until 1879) or the Academy of Fine Arts (1879-1882).

Making his living as a muralist, Lundahl created canvas paintings in his studio, which were then installed onsite. He painted church and secular murals for interiors in the Quad Cities region, as well as a few commissions in Chicago. While many of his murals were created in buildings that have been torn down or renovated, such as the Second Congregational Church (Moline), Moline Public Library, the Illinois Theater (Rock Island) and the FOE Building (Rock Island), his works still survive in the First Lutheran Church in Moline (both the altar panel and ten of the spandrel paintings) and the Davenport Capitol Theater.

Lundahl’s commission for ceiling paintings in the parlors of the Joseph Huntoon Homestead were part of the debate that raged around the eventual demolition of the house on 13 May 1986 to make way for an expansion of the First Presbyterian Church in Moline. After months of attempts by the fledgling Moline Preservation Society to save the house, then on the National Register of Historical Places, it was demolished, and with it, Lundahl’s ceiling paintings. The event caused quite a stir in the Quad Cities region, with both sides telling their stories on the pages of local newspapers.

Through these commissions, Lundahl established a reasonable reputation as a muralist in the Quad Cities, and as a result, he had a variety of commissions. An Argus article from 1887 relays the humorous tale of Lundahl’s commission to paint a ‘fine large donkey’ for a fête thrown by a Dr. Dunn. A short time later, Sam Davis, interested in throwing a similar party, sent one of his employees to the Dunn household to borrow the donkey. As the Argus reports:

Imagine the surprise of the household to see the young man appear with a bridle and halter, asking for the doctor’s donkey.

‘Yes,’ was the reply, ‘you can have it,’ and the roll of canvas was handed [to] him. Placing it mechanically under his arm, he went out in the back yard, and rummaged all around to find the stable and the donkey. Returning to the door, he again asked for the donkey, and was told he had it under his arm.

("He Wanted a Live Donkey," The Rock Island Argus. 3 February 1887.)

When not creating murals (or donkeys) on commission, Lundahl created sketches and paintings that focus on the Mississippi Valley. Working in oils, watercolor and graphite, these works – a dramatic shift in focus from his interior murals – are a portrait of the daily life in the region: river boats, landscapes, farm scenes and still lifes.

Hoping to establish his place in history, Lundahl commenced work in 1900 on what would become The Blacksmith. The work was meant to be a lasting tribute to John Deere, the blacksmith and innovator, and his discovery of a discarded piece of polished steel that he fashioned into plow that cut clean furrows into the Midwest prairie soil. Lundahl had hoped to sell the work to the John Deere Corporation, which never materialized. Lundahl family lore recounts that he would charge admission to see the blacksmith painting. Forgotten after his death, the work did not find a home until 1991 when it was restored, donated to Augustana and installed in Wallenberg Hall, where it remained for a number of years.

A slideshow on the opposite wall provides images of Lundahl, as well as images of some of his mural commissions. We would like to thank all whose efforts went into the success of this exhibition. Special thanks to the relatives of Frank Lundahl, Augustana College Special Collections, the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center, the Rock Island Historical Society, the Rock Island Preservation Society, the Moline Preservation Society, the Moline Public Library, the Davenport Public Library Richardson-Sloane Special Collections Center, Diann Moore, Diane Oestreicht, and Jill and Yancy Bolden.

This exhibition is dedicated to the memory Dr. Paula Arnell, 1960 graduate and trustee emerita of the college, in grateful recognition of her steadfast support and encouragement of the arts at Augustana College.

Media Sponsor: