"She Brought Forth Butter in a Lordly Dish"

The Origins of Minnesota BUTTER SCULPTURE

Karal Ann Marling

THE STATE FAIR is one of the great and enduring rituals of life in Minnesota. It marks the end of summer's warm-weather gala and the start of serious autumnal business; with all those earnest displays aimed at educating us in the proper methods of rolling piecrust and controlling cocklebur, can back-to-school time be far away? Although novelties appear along the Midway now and then, the familiar things we seek out year after year define the ritual dimension of fairgoing for most Minnesotans. There's Willie Nelson's night at the grandstand, the barker touting ever-sharp steak knives, the honey-and-sunflower-seed ice cream for sale in the Horticulture Building, the fresh-faced youngsters sleeping on the straw in the cow barns. And there's the lady in the down jacket, carving likenesses of pretty farm girls out of 68-pound blocks of pure Minnesota butter in a revolving, refrigerated "studio" at the back of the dairy building."

We expect to find the butter sculptor at work there every August although first-time visitors are apt to be stunned by the spectacle, especially when Princess Kay of the Milky Way pops out of the glass-sided freezer and offers hungry passersby samples of the butter carved

THE six-foot butter sculpture of Teddy Roosevelt (opposite), featured at the 1910 State Fair in the Milton Dairy Company's exhibit away as the modeling proceeds. What's it all about? Is the lady in the winter coat working in 38-degree temperatures a sadistic symbol of a Minnesota winter to come? Why is she carving butter blocks, of all things? And why do Minnesotans like it so? The answer is surprisingly complicated. It involves frontier women and the work deemed proper to the farm wife. It involves women's aspirations to work at new kinds of jobs, including the fine arts, in the late 19th century. The changing agricultural economy of Minnesota during that period is pertinent to the inquiry, too, along with an understanding of the hyperbole beloved of boosters and the display techniques by which wily promoters sought to validate their states' claims to greatness at the mighty fairs and expositions of fin-de-siècle America. Changing foodways-what Americans ate, how they did so, and why-are also key ingredients in the recipe for Minnesota butter sculpture.

THE STORY begins at a big fair "out East," some 86 years ago. It was "Minnesota Day" at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, and Governor Samuel R. Van Sant was in full cry. "Out in Minnesota," he assured potential skeptics among the reporters assembled on that warm June afternoon in 1901, "we raise the grain to feed the world, and our mammoth mills grind it into the best flour ever made." Indeed, an extravagant display of plump silk flour sacks (modeled after a much-remarked-upon display of the same commodity at the Columbian Exposition of 1893) asserted Minnesota's hegemony within the precincts of the Lib-

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¹ The title quotation is from Judges 5:25. See "The Beauty of Butter," *Living Age* 19 (Sept. 18, 1920):726-729; see also *Lake City Graphic*, Sept. 13, 1973, p. 5, *Sentinel* (Fairmount), Oct. 18, 1973, p. 1, and photos in *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Aug. 24, 1974, p. 9, *Minneapolis Tribune*, Aug. 31, 1974, p. 5B, and *Monticello Times*, Sept. 5, 1974, p. 3—all in annual scrapbooks, Communication Department, Minnesota State Fair (MSF). The newspapers are also available at the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS). The American Dairy Assn. of Minnesota sponsors present-day butter-sculpture displays.

eral Arts Building, while a figure cunningly wrought from native produce—"The Woman in Grain"—made another case for local honor from a perch atop the cornice of the Minnesota booth in the Agricultural Building.⁴

But wheat, however fetchingly displayed, was not the real object of the governor's affections. The flour booth bestowed on fairgoers each day some 1,500 "choice rolls made of Minnesota flour," each "graced with Minnesota butter," and Van Sant, it seems, had come to Buffalo to talk butter. "Recently, in their wisdom, our tillers of the soil diversified their farming, and we have turned attention, for a few years only, to dairy interests, and what is the result?" he asked with the confidence of a man who knows the answer will be altogether creditable to his constituents. "Last year the prices of our dairy products amounted to more than ten million dollars. Our butter takes the premium at every exposition held-at Paris, at the World's Fair, at Omaha-and it is going to take it here (laughter and applause) if they don't pack the judges against us. (Laughter.) So great have we become known in that respect that we have changed our name from the Gopher State to the great Bread and Butter State of the Union."1

In bestowing that new nickname upon itself. Minnesota was boasting and boosting, as all states did on like occasions. Yet the slogan also points to the iconic status of butter in the affairs of men and of women of the day. It is in the diaries of frontier women that regular discussion of Minnesota butter first occurs. Susan M. Adams, who moved with her husband. Andrew, from a comfortable St. Paul boardinghouse to the prairie near Shakopee in 1856, tellingly describes the deprivations of pioneer life by the absence of butter: they subsisted, she wrote, on a diet of salt pork, fried mush, and corncake with "nothing but pork fat on it." In the winter of 1857, a Winona editor gave vent to the perennial fear that "butter, and some varieties of groceries" would not last until spring; his housewife-readers in the decade before the Civil War learned to make cookies "without eggs or even butter" or, when that perishable luxury was available, bought it in 30-pound tubs and secreted it in the cellar, hoping the aroma of the turnips and cabbages would not spoil the delicate taste altogether.⁴

If they were the first to fret over Minnesota butter and the absence thereof, the women of the soon-to-be "Bread and Butter State" were also the first to produce it. At the Territorial Fair held in Minneapolis in October of 1855, "among the exhibits was a display of cheese, the first dairy interest to be exhibited in the history of the upper Mississippi valley," but it was "the ladies" who showed the butter, along with "flowers, home-made carpets and rugs, and many specimens of needlework and fancy articles." "Always to make good butter or cheese," declared the author of an authoritative volume on domestic economy, "shows great care and excellent judgment in the farmer's wife. When every department of the dairy is kept perfectly neat, there is hardly any exhibition of woman's industry more likely to make her husband proud."⁵

Mary E. Carpenter, a farmer's wife living near Rochester, consigned to her diary in 1871 a list of the chores she performed on a typical day during harvest season. "I got up before four," she noted wearily, "got breakfast . . . , skimmed milk, churned, worked over the churning already on hand, did a large washing, baked 6 loaves of bread." Rural wives and daughters continued to scald the pans, set the milk, cure the cream, churn, draw off the buttermilk, and wash and work and print their dairy butter with decorative patterns well into the 20th century-they also kept the "butter money" that was often the only income a woman could call her own. But creamery butter began to displace the farmhouse product after 1861, when one Alanson Slaughter of Wallkill, New York, collected cream from 375-odd herds and opened a butter factory.6

Four years later Oren Gregg of Vermont moved to the wheat country of Lyon County in southwestern Minnesota to spread the gospel of agricultural diversification—and dairying. "My grandfather used the cow to turn the grass of the old Green Mountains

^a The Bread and Butter State, 23, 34, 61, 69. On the Paris exposition, see U. S. Dept. of Agriculture, Yearbook (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1900), 608-615.

⁴ Quoted in Marjorie Kreidberg. Food on the Frontier: Minnesota Cooking from 1850 to 1900 with Selected Recipes (St. Paul: MHS Press, 1975). 3; see also p. 20 and 64. For an instance of butter storage in 1853, see Theodore C. Blegen, Minnesota. A History of the State (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975). 199-200. American butter-eating habits are criticized in "Cream Eaters and Butter Eaters," The Household (Boston) 12 (Dec., 1879):271.

⁵ R. W. Morrish, A History of Fairs (Chicago: International Assn. of Fairs and Expositions, 1929), 43; Elizabeth F. Ellet, ed., The New Cyclopaedia of Domestic Economy, and Practical Housekeeper (Norwich, Conn.: Henry Bill Publishing Co., 1873), 472. Women had always quite properly made America's butter, according to Alice Morse Earle, Home Life in Colonial Days (Reprint ed., Stockbridge, Mass.: Berkshire Traveller Press, 1974), 149.

⁸ Quoted in Kreidberg, Food on the Frontier, 7. On the Slaughter factory, see Susan Williams, Savory Suppers and Fashionable Feasts: Dining in Victorian America (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 118. An earlier (1856) factory is attributed to a Mr. Woodhull of Orange County, N.Y., by the New Yorker, Aug. 21, 1948, p. 22.

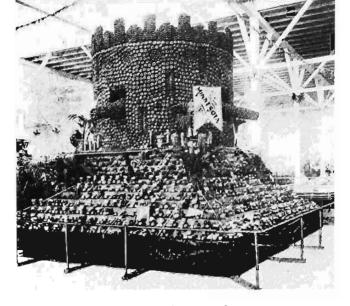
² Minnesota Board of Managers for the Pan-American Exposition at Buffalo. N.Y., Report: The Bread and Butter State (St. Paul: Pioneer Press Co., 1902), 34; Minnesota Day at the World's Columbian Exposition (Minneapolis: n.p., 1893), 34.

into butter," Gregg recalled. "Why could not I use the cow to turn the grass of the western prairie to butter?" His neighbors listened. Farmers who planted wheat also began to experiment with butter- and cheesemaking on a large scale. Owatonna was an early center of the industry. In Cottage Grove, George Woodward organized the Langdon Butter and Cheese Factory in 1875 to serve the St. Paul market; a Minnesota Butter and Cheese Association was founded in 1882; and by the mid-1880s, with 63 creameries in operation statewide, upstart Minnesota had taken the honors for butter at the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition in New Orleans.⁷

Improved refrigeration, the silo, the Swedish cream separator, and the Babcock test for measuring the butterfat content of milk-all these factors conspired to shift the manufacture of butter from the housewife's sunny dairy to the factory. Butter making entered the male domain of big business from whence Governor Van Sant and the Minnesota Board of Fair Managers for 1901 could point with pardonable pride at a multimillion dollar annual output, and a silver medal for their "collective display of butter." The narrow, if predictable, loss of the gold medal to New York State was irksome. Old-fashioned methods had all but disappeared. Of Minnesota's 77 competitors only five sent dairy butter, and three of those were farm wives. Among them was a Mrs. J. H. McRostie of Owatonna, who had come within a whisker of outscoring the best of the commercial output.8

Yet laudable as her performance was, the 72 participating creameries clearly represented the wave of a future marked by ever-accelerating profits and production. That sense of breathless, boastful optimism, tinged with a sort of agrarian megalomania, also characterized the first of two gold-medal-winning Minnesota displays scrutinized by the Buffalo *Express* on September 13, 1901. One display was a scale model of Fort Snelling composed, in the main, of 90 bushels of Wealthy apples, with cannon constructed of contrast-

⁹ Quoted in *The Bread and Butter State*, 20, 22. Five years earlier, a St. Paul dairy company defeated over 500 contestants (including New York) in a national competition at Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and won a silver statue; *Scientific American* 74 (Mar. 28, 1896):197.



HISTORIC Fort Snelling, delineated in Minnesota apples for the Pan-American Exposition in 1901

ing crabapples and gun loops "trimmed with mountain ash berries." It stood 18 feet tall, was over 29 feet in circumference, electrified for steady revolution, and redolent with the fragrance of a Lake City orchard. J. M. Underwood, proprietor of the Jewell Nursery in Lake City, had "displayed at the recent state fair at St. Paul" a similar "reproduction of the original Fort Snelling in apples" and was encouraged to duplicate the feat in Buffalo in order to dispel any lingering misapprehensions about the severity of the Minnesota climate. "Plums, grapes and many other fruits are raised in profusion," the Buffalo paper duly reported after watching the replica spin, "and at no distant day Minnesota will be as famous as a fruit state as it now is as the Bread and Butter State."*

MINNESOTA'S horticultural marvel dazzled the fruit growers of Buffalo and environs, but it would not have fazed more sophisticated connoisseurs of American fairs and expositions. At such affairs, the edible edifice, along with all manner of statuary executed in rare and tasty comestibles, was de rigeur. New York editor Horace Greeley's account of his visit to the Crystal Palace Exhibition in 1853, for instance, made note of the crowds always gathered about the booths of the confectioners, whose spun-sugar genre scenes and chocolate renditions of "the battles of our War of Independence and the Mexican Campaigns" were vastly more entertaining than the displays in the Agricultural Department. He also praised "a Minnesota collection" of "four white ears, twelve yellow ditto bastard gourd-seed corn" and some wild rice, neatly assembled by territorial adjutant general, Sylvanus B. Lowry, William G. Le Duc, who later became commissioner of agriculture, and several others: thanks to their efforts, wrote

⁷ Quoted in Blegen, Minnesota, 393. See also Blegen, p. 392-394; Paul F. Stahls, Jr., A Century of World's Fairs in Old New Orleans: 1884-1984 (Baton Rouge, La.: VAAPR, Inc., 1984), unpaginated: Butter, Cheese, and Dairy Stock Assn., Annual Report, 1885 (Red Wing: Red Wing Printing Co., 1886), 7, 91. According to the latter, Gregg won a \$10 premium for creamery butter.

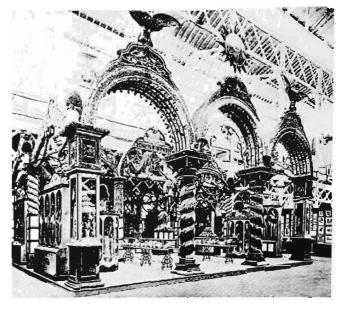
⁸ The Bread and Butter State, 74, 77. Marilyn Grant, "Wisconsin at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904," Wisconsin Magazine of History 65 (Summer, 1982):297, has more on Professor Stephen M. Babcock's test.

Greeley, Minnesota was "the only section of the United States making any pretence toward a show."¹⁰

But the sundry branches of the culinary profession had a distinct advantage over midwestern horticulturists in the arts of gaudy display. Since antiquity the tables of the rich and powerful had been garnished with swans of glittering ice, with pastries simulating mythical beasts belching clouds of savory steam. (Indeed, the curriculum of the modern chef still includes the garde-manger course in which the novice chefs master the rudiments of sculpting centerpieces in fat, tallow, salt dough, sugar, vegetables, and fruits.) In 1876, such wonders appeared in force at the gala Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. In the Agricultural Hall stood "a huge spire-shaped monument of white sugar, nearly fifteen feet in height, and ornamented with historical figures and groups in sugar and chocolate, illustrating incidents in the history of the United States," including the landing of the Pilgrim Fathers and the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The work of Mr. H. Malliard, this marvel occupied its own walnut case, a kind of swollen china cabinet resplendent with glass and mirrors, as did a similar "pyramid of candy" topped with a sweetmeat George Washington, submitted by Schare & Co. of New York."

But there is evidence that purveyors and promoters of other, less aesthetic produce were beginning to learn the tricks of the candy butcher's trade. The noted editor William Dean Howells, for one, was charmed by a glass case reverently displaying a brace of sugar-cured Cincinnati hams canvased "not in the ordinary yellow linen, but in silk of crimson, white, and gold." And the Kansas and Colorado display, largely overlooked at the time, featured a Liberty Bell made entirely of Western grains, grasses, and brush, with a gourd for a clapper. The critic for The Nation, who deplored the general tendency to display the nation's agricultural bounty as so many tin cans, crates, bottles, and barrels, lauded the ingenuity of Iowa, which had represented the fertility of its land by showing, in a series of glass columns, four-, five-, and six-foot sections of rich prairie soil.12

FROM THESE modest roots grew the bountiful harvest of agricultural exotica that graced the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. The most memorable sights of the Chicago fair included the colossal globe and the 32-foot lighthouse submitted by Los Angeles County and made entirely of California oranges; the walnut elephant, with details in peanuts, oranges, and lemons, from the same source; Santa Clara's mounted knight, in prunes; San Diego's citrus Liberty Bell; a series of cows, horses, and spread eagles done in Iowa corn; and, in the Illinois Building, a "heroic-size" grain painting partly concealed behind a curtain of leaves "caught up by a cunningly-wrought rope, the tassels of



INLAID DESIGNS made of various grains decorated the Minnesota exhibit at the Columbian Exposition.

which were made of yellow corn." By the end of the festivities, the oranges had shrunk badly, revealing the wire fastenings that held them in place. California was a long way from Chicago, and organizers had made no provision for the ravages of time (unlike the Minneso-tans who later took several hundred bushels of cold-storage fruit as reserve to Buffalo in 1901). The tower, the elephant, and the rest, according to one commentator, ended the Fair "looking much the worse for exposure."¹³

Such dramatic and bloated displays of comestibles were a constant delight to the 19th-century eye and

¹¹ Frank Leslie's Illustrated Historical Register of the Centennial Exposition 1876 (New York: Leslie's Publishing House, 1877), 162, 212; James D. McCabe, The Illustrated History of the Centennial Exposition (Cincinnati: Jones Brothers & Co., 1876), 534. Information on garde-manger training is from David P. Kellaway, chief instructor at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y., to the author, Feb. 13, 1986, letter in author's possession. Contemporary examples of chefs' artworks are described in Minneapolis Star and Tribune, Mar. 28, p. 1C, April 25, p. 5C, July 15, p. 4C. 1986, and Feb. 18, 1987, p. 7T.

¹² Howells, "A Sennight of the Centennial," Atlantic Monthly 38 (July, 1876):102; Leslie's Historical Register, 116; G. E. W., Jr., "The International Exhibition. XII: Agricultural Hall," The Nation 23 (Aug. 10, 1876):88. "Burton Benedict, et al., The Anthropology of World's Fairs (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 15-16;

¹¹ Burton Benedict, et al., The Anthropology of World's Fairs (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 15-16; Neil Harris, "Museums, Merchandising, and Popular Taste: The Struggle for Influence," in Ian M. G. Quimby, ed., Material Culture and the Study of American Life (New York: W.

¹⁰ Greeley, ed., Art and Industry as Represented in the Exhibition at the Crystal Palace (New York: Redfield, 1853), 271-273.

palate. Novel kinds of foodstuffs, rushed to Chicago or Philadelphia or Buffalo with no loss of wholesomeness, confirmed the miracles of technological progress: transportation had made a vast nation small, and its benefits meant that the humblest citizen could dine on fare once tasted only by kings. But famine, panics, economic depression, and hunger were never far from modern memory either. In a curious way, the surfeit of apples and chocolates and the like comforted those with reason to remember real deprivation. That can't happen nowadays, proclaimed the tower of oranges and the fortress of apples constructed by Minnesota's prosperous nurserymen, who were barely a generation removed from the hardships of frontier days. The architectural features of many of these booths also reflect the influence of the corn palaces that became prominent ingredients in the festival life of the Midwest after 1886. Built first in Iowa to celebrate the harvest, to promote agribusiness, immigration, and tourism by the force of sheer novelty, the colossal size of such temporary constructions in tiny kernels of grain bespoke the spirit of boosterism. This spirit was also the moving force behind St. Paul's decision to erect a palace of ice in tongue-in-cheek response to "the libe of an Eastern journalist who had compared Minnesota's capital unfavorably with Siberia."14

These homely palaces on the Great Plains, whether of corn or virgin ice, were exercises in joyous hyperbole and hardnosed, commercial promotion. They were also the prototypes for Ohio's "temple" in the Agricultural Building at Chicago, the peristyle of which consisted of tall glass jars filled with grain; for the bushy sorghum and grass pavilion of the Oklahoma Territory, accurately described as "one of the most peculiar . . . among the oddities and fancies of the cereal archi-

¹⁵ Ives, *Dream City*, portfolio 2, nos. 9, 15, portfolio 3, no. 16, and portfolio 17, no. 6. The Iowa building, with an interior entirely covered in cereal grain, featured a miniature "coal palace."

¹⁶ The Bread and Butter State, 18-19.

¹⁷ Here and below, see *The Bread and Butter State*, 16, 18, 19. Although butter sculpting has long been a female and an amateur art, it has been practiced occasionally by wellknown male artists. Chicago sculptor Lorado Taft, for example, received \$35 from an 1890 Masonic fair in Detroit for modeling a 160-pound bust in butter; Letters sent, 1890, Lorado Taft Papers, University Archives, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. tects'; for the Pennsylvania booth, with the state seal picked out in seeds and yet another Liberty Bell of grain within; and, of course, for the Fort Snelling in apples that won the gold medal in Buffalo eight years later.¹⁵

The tower of rosy apples, albeit surmounted by a banner celebrating the excellences of "The Bread and Butter State," was a private venture, paid for by Underwood and his nursery. The bulk of Minnesota's public funds for the Pan-American Exposition had gone into the fabrication of a second article of display, which not only captured a gold medal in its own right but also drew "thousands of people . . . who would not otherwise have gone" to the state's electrically refrigerated case in the Dairy Building. The proud delegation of overseers reported that "every one who saw it carried away with him or her the impression that Minnesota was a great and enterprising state." The object of such avid interest was a detailed copy of the new, \$3 million capitol building at St. Paul. Over 11 feet long, over five feet in height, the model was made entirely of creamy Minnesota butter.¹⁶

Shortly before the Buffalo extravaganza had been scheduled to open, it occurred to those in charge that a plaster likeness of the proud dome of the State Capitol might be a suitable talisman for exhibition, but nobody could promise to make one in less than four months. It was then that John K. Daniels of St. Paul, "a promising sculptor," and his friend, W. S. Jensen, appeared on the scene proposing to do the job in butter. Daniels "had done some notable work in butter for the state fair," and had acquired there a reputation that warranted the nearly \$2,000 in donations and quick appropriations necessary to support such an undertaking. The governor provided \$500 from his contingency fund, the Butter Makers' Association gave \$100 more, and, when a deficit still remained, "the young men were sufficiently patriotic and enthusiastic to go ahead with the work and leave final results to the future. All things considered it was a remarkable undertaking. The best space in the Dairy building at Buffalo was secured, it being directly in front of the main entrance so that no visitor could avoid seeing the model. If five million people visited the building there were five million who saw the new Minnesota capitol sculptured in butter, and the novelty of the work doubly attracted attention. A large plate glass case . . . was erected . . . and in this case the sculptor, Mr. John K. Daniels, and his brother, Hacon Daniels, as assistant, worked fifteen or more hours every day for five or six weeks. It was a very risky enterprise so far as health is concerned, and that not any untoward result followed for these young men is a matter of congratulation. . . . The general prediction was that the model could not be preserved, but fortunately this proved otherwise.""

W. Norton & Co., 1978), 147; Halsey C. Ives, The Dream City, A Portfolio of Photographic Views of the World's Columbian Exposition (St. Louis: N. D. Thompson Publishing Co., 1893), portfolio 2, nos. 2, 3, portfolio 8, nos. 12, 13.

[&]quot; Cynthia Elyce Rubin, "The Midwestern Corn Palaces," The Clarion (New York), Fall, 1983, 25-31; Karal Ann Marling, The Colossus of Roads: Myth and Symbol along the American Highway (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 75-100.

People came back to the building made of butter time after time, apologists admitted, just to see if it had started to go rancid or melt away! The novelty "was almost startling," conceded exposition officials, rivaling that of the electrical apparatus used for the first time on a massive scale in Buffalo (the very equipment, in fact, that kept the model intact throughout a sweltering summer). Minnesota's masterpiece in golden butter—an advertisement for her newfound dairy leadership—"was a marvel and a gem."

Albeit of memorable size, the real novelty of the great Minnesota butter sculpture of 1901 was, however, the fact that it had been executed by two young men. Specimens of art in butter had been a regular feature of expositions of all types since 1876, but in the centennial year the carving of butter, like its traditional mode of manufacture, had still been largely women's work. To work butter also meant to shape the product into portions of a usable size, often with a decorated mold that impressed the maker's mark upon the surface as an assurance of quality and purity, a sign of pride, or a simple expression of the impulse to make precious things beautiful. Caroline S. Brooks of Arkansas was embellishing only slightly upon that tradition when she turned up in the Women's Building at the Centennial Exposition toward the end of its run and proposed to turn a "shapeless, golden mass" of good, Arkansas butter into the likeness of a slumbering maiden while thunderstruck visitors looked on.18

MRS. BROOKS is the first recorded butter sculptor in American history. Whether by accident or by design, her transfer from the secluded precincts of the Women's Building to the Judges' Hall, where a special demonstration for the press was held on October 14, coincided with a scheduled "Arkansas Day" and with the centennial meeting of the National Butter and Egg Association (also slated for Judges' Hall) at which the illegitimate traffic in "oleomargarine" was loudly denounced.¹⁹

Observers were torn between their interest in the technical aspects of the performance and its artistic merits. Ingram's popular guidebook, which labeled the Brooks alto-relievo of *Dreaming Iolanthe* the "most beautiful and unique exhibit in the Centennial," stressed the manner in which "the apparently difficult task of modelling in butter the expressive face and the bust" was accomplished with the simplest of equipment: a liberal supply of ice (concealed in a tin frame around and beneath the emerging portrait), common butter paddles, cedar sticks, broom straws, and camels'-hair "pencils." Her exhibition of skill was all the more remarkable for the modesty of the means at hand.

Despite the stuntlike aspects of making statuary in



THE BUTTER MODEL of slumbering Iolanthe by Caroline S. Brooks, featured at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia

an unusual medium under severe constraints of time, Mrs. Brooks was, by and large, treated as a serious artist whose work could be judged on the basis of the emotive qualities of theme relished in more conventional busts made of parian or terra cotta. One historian of the exhibition, for instance, praised the "exquisite head carved in butter" as a fine example of "native" talent, because "the lady had no regular instruction in art." Another critic reviewing the range of distaff work on view in the Women's Building, sourly opined that "In art the coloring of photographs and the decoration of small pieces of porcelain were, if we exclude sculpture in butter, the only branches that looked like acknowledging female monopoly."²⁰

But the editors of Frank Leslie's Illustrated Register of the Centennial thought the pavilion surprising pre-

¹⁸ Waldo Carlton Wright, "Butter Molds," Retirement Living (New York), July, 1973, p. 41-42; "Look What Shape the Butter's In," Sunset (Menlo Park, Cal.), Nov., 1964, p. 172-173. On Mrs. Brooks, see John Allwood, The Great Exhibitions (London: Studio Vista, 1977), 56; Oliver W. Larkin, Art and Life in America (Revised ed., New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 241, was the first modern historian to note the significance of Mrs. Brooks's performance.

¹⁹ Here and below, see J. S. Ingram, *The Centennial Exposition*, *Described and Illustrated* (Philadelphia: Hubbard Bros., 1876), 705-706; *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, Oct. 16, p. 1, Oct. 18, p. 1, both 1876, microfilm copies, University of Minnesota.

²⁰ McCabe, Illustrated History, 657; Edward C. Bruce, The Century: Its Fruits and Its Festival (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1877), 231. cisely because of the high quality of legitimate art work by women—of oils and sculpture by those from whom needlework and genteel crafts might have been expected: "The modeling, of which there are several exhibits, is creditable, and one instance in this line is deserving of high encomium. This is a medallion head in high relief, modeled from common butter, and representing an ideal subject, entitled 'The Dreaming Iolanthe.' In considering this work, the difficulties attached to the employment of such a material should be taken into account, while it must be conceded that, whatever material the artist employs, the work itself is one exhibiting a high degree of talent, a fine ideal feeling, as well as exceeding delicacy and brilliancy of manipulation."²¹

Although many women who would struggle to attain full professional status in the fine arts in the 1880s and 1890s confessed to having been inspired in their quest for equality by the displays in the Women's Building at the Philadelphia World's Fair, Mrs. Brooks's Iolanthe seems instead to point backward toward female domesticity and handiwork within the snug confines of the family circle. In many cultures, butter meant for consumption is molded or otherwise decorated for festive occasions by the lady of the house. And there is a homely American tradition of child prodigies using supplies from mama's larder on their initial forays into the fine arts. Horatio Greenough, future sculptor of the undraped Washington that was to become one of the most controversial examples of American genius in the 19th century, was popularly believed to have revealed his incipient talents by modeling "a lion couchant . . . with a spoon from a pound of butter to astonish his mother's guests at tea."22

Painter and historian William Dunlap, in the 1830s, found it odd that women should seek careers in sculpture but by no means peculiar that one of the few who did so began in the kitchen, pinching bread dough into clever shapes. Insofar as the manipulation and presentation of foodstuffs in the home was legitimate work for women and their children throughout the centen-

²⁰ William Dunlap, History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States 2 (Reprint ed., New York: Dover Publications, 1969): 132, 412-413. See also Adelia Belle Beard, "Butter-Dish Toys," St. Nicholas 35 (Jan., 1908):256-259. nial century, it was also, like sewing, a potential source of pleasure, self-expression, and fun. As late as 1908, St. Nicholas Magazine was urging a beautifully dressed "Mother" (one with servants at her beck and call!) to spend rainy days in the nursery making cunning toys out of the wooden dishes in which butter came from the grocer's shop.²³

Female butter sculptors were sent back to the nurseries and pantries of America, or so it seems, at the same time the rural butter-and-egg lady was being displaced by the creamery. At any rate, while such statuary was a common feature of the exhibition circuit after 1876, women are almost never credited by chroniclers of such events with the execution of the ladylike bas-reliefs of cows and flowers that became the preferred forms of butter art toward the end of the century.

Minnesota's dairy display at the Columbian Exposition of 1893—Governor Knute Nelson bragged about the state's "288 creameries, and the 50,000,000 pounds of butter" made that year—followed the new fashion. Wispy tendrils of extruded butter formed into grape-

MINNESOTA'S butter display at the Columbian Exposition held in Chicago, 1893



²¹ Leslie's Historical Register, 156; p. 208 shows a preponderance of female themes in the conventional statuary exhibited in the Women's Building.

²² See, for example, the career of Candace Wheeler, in Karal Ann Marling, "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman: Miss Dora Wheeler," Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art 65 (Feb., 1978):46-57. See also Albert Ten Eyck Gardner, quoted in Richard McLanathan, The American Tradition in the Arts (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 204.

vines and meager bunches of posies were set off none too attractively against a cloth backdrop; at the center of the grouping were stiff silhouettes of a cow and churn made over wooden forms in the manner of continental cuisine. Perhaps this somewhat attenuated and tasteful style represented an effort to redeem buttercarving from the realm of overt sensationalism, since at least one fairgoing critic of a lumpish sculptural ensemble remarkable solely for its construction in several tons of pure Colorado silver and gold, declared that "Whether butter or gold, the 'phenomenal' statue is lacking in interest."²⁴

NEITHER the public nor the promoters of the dairy industry were immune to blatant sensationalism, however. Despite the caveats of art lovers, the Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904 witnessed a resurgence of butter sculpture in a massive, fully three-dimensional form openly derived from Minnesota's seminal architectural "gem" of 1901, Daniels's statue of the capitol building. Iowa, for example, delivered three effigies in butter: a small model of the first creamery in the state (built in 1872); a somewhat larger rendering of the new dairy school and creamery at Iowa State College in Ames; and a bust of "John Stewart, First Iowa Creamery Man." California entered the lists for the first time with a multifigural butter tableau that included a huge goddess, a steer, and a bear.²⁵

Wisconsin, after an acrimonious debate, bought 600 pounds of local butter of the cheapest grade and installed, in a chilled case at the entrance to the state bailiwick, a life-size statue of a milkmaid attending to her life-size special-purpose dairy cow. William Dempster Hoard, president of the Wisconsin Board of Managers, was anxious to participate fully in the dairy display in order to revive an industry compromised, after a winning performance in 1876, by widespread water-

A LIFE-SIZE tableau, in butter, of Father Hennepin and companions discovering the Falls of St. Anthony was part of the state's exhibit at the St. Louis fair. 1904.



ing of the milk sold for butter manufacture. But he was also sensitive to mounting complaints about butter art. "Butter is butter," wrote a disaffected tourist in St. Louis. "Graceful and ethereal as its forms may be, one would not hesitate long to slice off a nose or a finger to butter his pancakes." Another wag presented an ironic critique of the economics of the situation: "Butter is now becoming so rare as compared with other forms of 'oleaginizing' the staff of life, that it seems entirely suitable that it be employed in the fine arts. It is too valuable to eat. . . . Butter in this country is becoming like roast beef in the British Isles, something to be indulged in only on Fridays or Tuesdays."²⁶

For his part, Hoard found many of the images carved in butter at odds with its hoped-for reputation as a healthful food, free of impurities and tubercular infection. "I am not very enthusiastic about putting a hairy cow into the butter," he told the functionary in charge of the Wisconsin exhibit.

In the end, Hoard relented, but Wisconsin's hairy cow was no match for two eye-popping butter masterpieces from Minnesota. One was a simulated bronze statue at an immense scale—a mother and child atop a lofty plinth guarded by life-size allegorical figures and adorned by a bas-relief of the state seal. The other consisted of a highly realistic rendering of a birch-bark canoe, steered by a doughty voyageur, from which debouched Father Hennepin and an Indian guide (with a remarkable butter feather sticking straight up from the crown of his head).²⁷

The heyday of butter sculpture coincided with the development of table rituals involving the consumption of butter and with a widespread cultural preference for shaped foodstuffs. Rich butter had long stood for liberality and luxury in American cooking. In the 1890s

²⁵ Freeman R. Conaway, comp. and ed., Report of the Iowa Commission to the Louisiana Purchase Exposition (Des Moines: Register and Leader Co., 1905), 198, 202; Walter B. Stevens, The Forest City, Comprising the Official Photographic Views of the Universal Exposition (St. Louis: N. D. Thompson Publishing Co., 1904). n.p., plate of "Iowa's Corn Trophies"; The History of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition (St. Louis: Universal Exposition Publishing Co., 1905), 646.

²⁶ Here and below, see quotations in Grant, "Wisconsin at the . . . Exposition," 295.

⁵⁷ Report of the Minnesota Board of Managers for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition (St. Paul: Pioneer Press Mfg. Depts., 1905), 16-19; the report notes that other states covered plaster statues with a thin coating of butter. Only Minnesota displayed sculpture of solid butter. See also David Francis, The Universal Exposition of 1904 2 (St. Louis: Bennitt, Mark Co., 1913):181.

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²⁴ Minnesota Day, 13, 20; Ives, Dream City, portfolio 7, no. 16. Although she was not widely credited, Mary E. (Mrs. George H.) McDowell of Minneapolis sculpted the Minnesota display, which sat on a "maroon cloth placed over ice"; Northwest Magazine (St. Paul), Oct., 1893, p. 16.

specialized service dishes for butter, with compartments for ice and intricate hinged tops designed to keep the lid off the napery, were indicative of its high symbolic status, as were butter knives, used only to transfer portions from such vessels to individual "butter pats" or bread-and-butter plates.²⁶ Like the treatment of salt, the presentation of butter emphasized the preciousness of the commodity.

And so the Minnesota State Fair proudly exhibited big, bold butter statues that were the state's gift to the repertory of exposition display techniques. Indeed, in Minnesota, where women had begun to regain the custody of the art even before the turn of the century, the fair kept the genre going as an indigenous folk art long after it had succumbed to changing foodways and slick advertising elsewhere. The Milton Dairy Company of St. Paul, makers of "Star Brand Butter," constructed an octagonal glass refrigerator in the Dairy Building to spotlight a series of annual surprises in butter, by turns topical, old-fashioned, or openly sentimental in their appeal. In 1898 E. Frances Milton, wife of owner Thomas Milton, carved therein what was said to be "the most elaborate piece of butter statuary ever exhibited"-a tribute to the recent Spanish war surmounted by an allegorical Victory "taking the banner from a falling soldier" and decorated, at the base, with reliefs showing "Dewey at Manila" and "Roosevelt's Rough Riders."29

In 1903 Mrs. Milton retired from competition, and the firm hired John Daniels to continue her work. His first statue for Milton Dairy was a seven-foot tribute to the farm mother, watching "Her Son's First Errand."

²⁰ Here and below, see "Cream of North Star Stock: Art in Butter," *Pioneer Press*, Sept. 10, 1898, MSF Scrapbook; *Pioneer Press*, Aug. 29, 1903, p. 2; Milton Dairy advertisement. *St. Paul Dispatch*, Aug. 29, 1903, p. 5; 1910 trade card, in collection of the author; Ray P. Speer and Harry J. Frost, *Minnesota State Fair: The History and Heritage of 100 Years* ([St. Paul]: Argus Publishing Co., 1964), 48. For a fictional account of a visit to the fair, see Grace H. Flandrau, *Being Respectable* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1923), 123, describing "the sheaf of wheat modelled in butter."

²⁰ Speer and Frost, Minnesota State Fair, 121, 128, 129, 134, 139. For the wide variety of displays at dairy expositions, see Exhibition of Models for the Monument to the Pioneer Woman held at the Minnesota State Fair and the Northwest Dairy Exposition, September 3-10, 1927 (New York: Reinhardt Galleries, 1927), unpaginated promotional pamphlet; on the Canadian butter sculpture, see Allwood, The Great Exhibitions, 128-129.



A 1920s State Fair butter display by the Milton Dairy; the boy sits on a standard, 68-pound box of bulk butter.

The 1910 Milton offering was a six-foot Teddy Roosevelt in a pith helmet, rampant above a defunct lion. The 1911 group consisted of a cow, her calf, and a barefoot boy with trousers rolled above his knees, helping the youngster to find his breakfast.

Around 1920, in a slyly self-referential tribute to butter, a little girl passes a piece of buttered bread across a table to her baby brother, who shares it with his eager pooch. And since the State Fair served as host to both the National Dairy Show and the Northwest Dairy Exposition during the early 1920s, it is not implausible to suggest a Minnesota ancestry for the equestrian statue "of the Prince of Wales . . . made entirely of butter" in the Canadian pavilion of London's British Empire Exhibition of 1924-25, said to have been "one of the most widely remembered" attractions of that event.³⁰

What few bits of commentary on butter-modeling in the 1920s exist tend to support the notion of a Minnesota style based on a state exhibition tradition of largescale realism. At any rate, work being done at the State Fair by Daniels, Lu Verharen Lavell, and their successors stood in marked contrast to prize-winning displays mounted between 1915 and 1927 at fairs and dairy shows in at least 12 other states by Alice Cooksley of San Francisco. A transplanted Englishwoman who began making flowers out of butter during a stint in her husband's Illinois creamery, she first showed her version of the art at the Panama-Pacific Exposition of 1915, where the riot of pink and red butter blossoms, tinted

²⁸ On the value and status of butter, see Evan Jones, American Food, The Gastronomic Story (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 115-116; Williams, Savory Suppers, 120-121; Mary Sears Rhodes, "More About Butter Chips," Hobbies (Chicago), May, 1942, p. 55; Mary E. Monze, "Please Pass the Butter," American Home (Garden City, N.Y.), Oct., 1958, p. 36-37. For a recent use of butter sculpture at a public event, see Time, May 12, 1986, p.37.

with food coloring, "made a sensation" and took the grand prize in the field of modeling. "Since then," according to a biographical article, "Mrs. Cooksley's services have been greatly in demand."³¹

Although Mrs. Cooksley won a prize for modeling, she did not take the sculpture award at the San Francisco Fair: butter carving had lost whatever lingering connections with the fine arts had survived from its 1876 debut. Women could once more do it with impunity, but in places far from the usual preserves of truth and beauty. It had become a decisively popular kind of art, and a down-home affair, despite the expensive revolving "studios" with their portable refrigeration units. The peripatetic Mrs. Cooksley had devoted not a little thought to what her butter bouquets really meant. "Perhaps most people wouldn't think of my work as art," she told an interviewer, "but it brings pleasure to many who couldn't be reached in other ways. To many a hard-working farm woman, butter means churning, lifting heavy cans, cleaning endless operators, backaches, and headaches. I would like to have it mean more to those women. I would like them to think of my flowers the next time the work seems too hard."

IF dairying is less arduous in the 1980s, it is no less worrisome. But for a select few of the young women on Minnesota's 24,000 dairy farms State Fair time brings a special reward. Every year they compete for the title of "Princess Kay of the Milky Way." For the winner and her court of runners-up a very special honor is reserved. Swaddled in goose-down jackets, they sit in full view of

BUTTER SCULPTOR Linda Christensen at work



passers-by in a rotating glass booth in the Dairy and Meat Products Building, where their portraits are carved from one of those 68-pound butter blocks.³² Scarved and booted, Linda Christensen of Minneapolis has been doing the carving since 1973, unruffled by surging crowds that long in the August heat for a blast of wintry air to waft their way when the case opens briefly, and a Dairy Princess emerges to offer the tailings on a paper plate.

The current lieutenant-governor, Marlene Johnson, is a butter-sculpture fan, known to spend long periods in that particular corner of the dairy display. In truth, it is easy to be caught up in the process, as sitter and sculptor twirl slowly about, along with the finished busts and all the uncarved blocks, each one with a studio photograph of its future subject pinned on its buttery yellow face. Stephanie Dickey of Leonard, the 1985 Princess Kay, took her statue home with her. It went on display in the cheese store in the mall in Bemidji where Stephanie works.³³

But if you can't get to Bemidji any time soon, stop by the fair some summer, watch the butter-sculpting, and nibble for yourself on a rich hunk of Minnesota's heritage. Imagine the frontier bride learning to make cookies without shortening; the farm wife printing butter in her dairy; the wheat grower hedging his bets by building a herd; the legislator bursting with pride in his new state; the turn-of-the-century fairgoer dazzled by the sights and smells and tastes of a new world of abundance—all gathered around the revolving case, too, remembering what butter sculpture was like when Minnesota was still "The Bread and Butter State."

¹¹ Here and below, see Marie Rowe Dunbar, "She Can Make a Lump of Butter Look like a Garden of Flowers," *American Magazine*, July 1, 1927, p. 68.

³² Minneapolis Star and Tribune, June 14, 1986, p. 3B; Post-Bulletin (Rochester), Aug. 29, 1985, p. 11.

³³ See, for example, a photograph of Lt.-Governor Johnson, *Leader-Record* (Gonvick), Oct. 2, 1985; see also *Thief River Falls Times*, Sept. 16, 1985, and *Red Wing Republican Eagle*, Aug. 30, 1985—all in MSF Scrapbook.

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