



Untitled (The Death and Burial of Abraham), 1955. Paint on Masonite, 52 × 36 inches. Collection of the Museum of Everything, London.

Jesse Howard’s (1885–1983, b. Shamrock, Missouri) signs were first featured in *Art in America* through Gregg Blasdel’s seminal essay “Grassroots Art in America” (1968). His work was later included in exhibitions at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota (1974), and at the Philadelphia College of Art (1981). His work has been widely discussed in magazines and newspapers across the country and is included in the collections of a number of museums, including the American Folk Art Museum, New York; the American Visionary Arts Museum, Baltimore; the Kansas City Art Institute; and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC.

Jesse Howard: Thy Kingdom Come is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis by Jeffrey Uslip, Chief Curator.

Special thanks to the Kansas City Art Institute; the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; and Carl Hammer Gallery, Chicago.

Related Programs

RE: Art of the Rural
Saturday, February 28, 1:00 pm

Breakfast with the Curators
Friday, March 20, 8:30 am / Tour starts at 8:50 am
Open to all membership levels. Complimentary coffee and baked goods. Register at camstl.org/breakfast.

Symposium: Natural Disasters, Free Speech, and the Death of Painting
Saturday, April 11, 10:00 am–4:00 pm



Contemporary Art
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Jesse Howard: Thy Kingdom Come

Thy Kingdom Come is the first comprehensive museum survey of Jesse Clyde Howard, a self-taught artist, evangelist, and advocate of “free thought and free speech,” who lived and worked in Fulton, Missouri, from the 1940s through the early 1980s. The exhibition presents more than one hundred hand-painted signs, each proclaiming religious exhortations, political denunciations, and autobiographical commentary. *Thy Kingdom Come* documents Howard’s steadfast commitment to the First Amendment—an inalienable right, which was, according to the artist, under constant threat from both communism and progressivism.

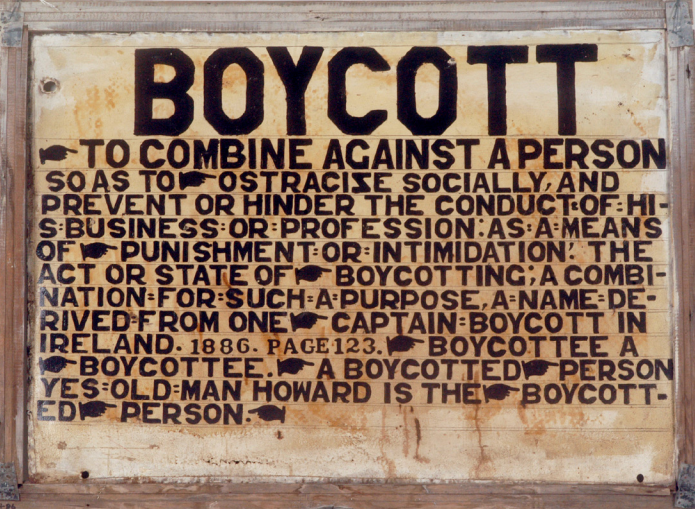
In 1903, at the age of eighteen, Howard pursued several temporary occupations on the West Coast, where he encountered a variety of vernacular signage. His fascination with the role of text in the public sphere would profoundly inform his lifelong artistic production. In 1944 Howard and his wife, Maude Linton, moved with their five children to Sorehead Hill, a twenty-acre compound north of Fulton. Here, Howard developed his aesthetic practice, devoting himself to the creation of text-based sculptures that expound personal dogmas and cultural perceptions.



Audio Tour
Download the CAM app at camstl.org/app or ask for an iPod at the front desk to hear directly from the curator and artist on the audio tour.

Gallery Guide
Contemporary Art
Museum St. Louis

January 16–
April 11, 2015



Boycott, 1960. Paint on assembled metal and wood, 33 × 47 × 2 ¾ inches. Collection of the Kansas City Art Institute.

Howard used the Bible to support his confrontational political views and stalwart individualism. Verse notations appear alongside the names of his local and national adversaries, often invoking passages to reprimand ineffective politicians, “sneak thieves,” and various aberrant figures. Such works demonstrate the nuanced and performative nature of Howard’s construction of self. His forthright language and cohesive visual style reveal complex religious and political attitudes. By the time of his death in 1983, Howard devised an immersive installation of textual works in and around his sprawling compound. Viewers are asked to be literate in topics ranging from local and international politics to Biblical scripture. The signs’ legibility is complicated by their multifaceted function; Howard presents the choice to either “read” his work as texts that reflect his authoritative voice and iconoclastic self-identity or to “see” them as objects of symbolic code and formal design.

The Saw and the Scroll



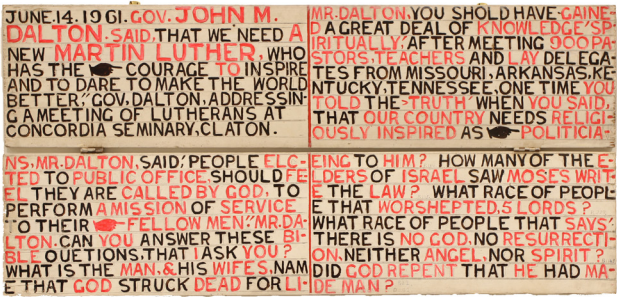
Jesse Howard’s assemblage *The Saw and the Scroll* comprises the tension between “reading” (the scroll) and “seeing” (the saw) that recurs throughout his practice. While Howard visually unites these oppositional elements, the overarching theme of the work is division. This sculpture, arguably one of Howard’s most significant works, overlays a salvaged crosscut saw onto a rectangular canvas. Both feature topics ranging from Biblical narratives to local events in Fulton, Missouri. The saw, visually cleaving the work in half, offers a literal depiction of the work’s assertive content; Howard’s vitriolic personal rhetoric corresponds to the work’s threatening iconography.

For Howard, “the confusion of language” and “the earth divided,” cited throughout the text, allegorize his community’s misunderstanding, rejection, and persecution of him and his work. Howard’s early signage was met with widespread condemnation, leading some in the local community to steal and deface his works. As a result, Howard publically reprimanded his peers by installing his combative signs throughout Fulton. These works function as a visual sermon, preaching the inequities present in Biblical literature to his neighbors, legitimizing the prophetic nature of his “signs and wonders,” and in the process offering salvation to what he saw as his morally corrupt community.

The Saw and the Scroll, 1977–78. Acrylic and crayon on canvas, wood, and metal, 39 ¾ × 71 × 1 ½ inches. Collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, gift of Chuck and Jan Rosenak and museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment.

Missouri Politicians Mentioned in Howard’s Work

John M. Dalton (1900–1972) served as attorney general of Missouri from 1952 to 1960 and governor of Missouri from 1961 to 1965. As governor, Dalton helped establish the Ozark National Scenic Riverways national park area, seat-belt legislation, and a points system for reprimanding traffic violators.



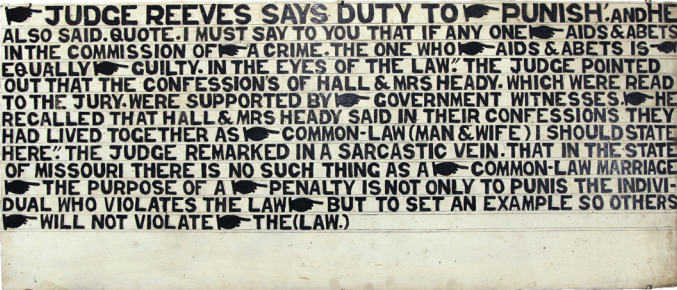
Gov. John M. Dalton, 1961. Paint on assembled wood, 23 × 48 × 1 inches. Collection of the Kansas City Art Institute.

Warren E. Hearnes (1923–2009) served a variety of posts during his political tenure in Missouri. In 1952—the same year he earned his law degree from the University of Missouri—he won a race for the Mississippi County House seat, becoming Missouri’s youngest state representative. In 1961 he assumed the office of secretary of state, and only four years later was inaugurated as governor, becoming the first Missourian to hold the office for two consecutive terms. As governor, he was known as a guardian of the disenfranchised, establishing regional mental health institutions, signing the Public Accommodation Act and the Fair Housing Acts, and fortifying the Missouri Human Rights Commission.



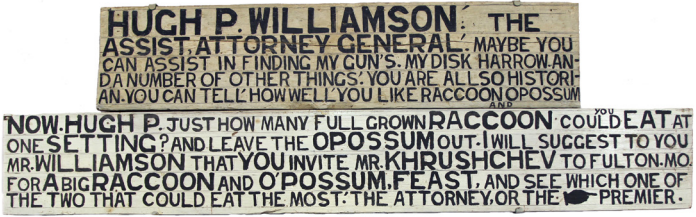
What is Going on Behind the Iron Curtain in Fulton, Mo?, 1970s. Paint on wood, 7 ½ × 56 ½ × 1 ½ inches. Collection of the Kansas City Art Institute.

Albert L. Reeves (1873–1971) served as a commissioner of the Missouri Supreme Court from 1921 to 1923, after which he became one of two US District Court judges in the Western District of Missouri. As Federal Judge, Reeves helped dismantle Missouri’s political machine headed by “Boss Tom” Pendergast.



Judge Reeves, n.d. Paint on Masonite, 20 × 47 × 1 ¼ inches. Collection of the Kansas City Art Institute.

Hugh P. Williamson (1904–80) served as Missouri’s assistant state attorney general from 1949 to 1961, when he became Callaway County Magistrate Court Judge. A former heavyweight boxer, Williamson was a notoriously uncompromising arbiter who often examined the entirety of a defendant’s moral character rather than the singular circumstances of the trial.



Hugh P. Williamson, n.d. Paint on assembled wood, 15 ¾ × 52 × 2 inches. Collection of the Kansas City Art Institute.