

JOHN AUGUSTUS WALKER'S

Historical Panorama of

ALABAMA AGRICULTURE

In the spring of 1939 Posey Oliver Davis, director of Alabama's agricultural Cooperative Extension Service, commissioned artist John Augustus Walker to create a comprehensive visual record of the history of farming within our state to be featured at the 1939 Alabama State Fair in Birmingham. Breaking with a tradition of displaying canned goods and record-setting crops, Davis planned to offer something more spectacular that fall, for which Walker's paintings would be the dramatic centerpiece.

A native of Mobile, J. A. Walker had painted previously a series of large murals in Mobile for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and came highly recommended by its regional director. Over the next several months the artist conferred with administrators at the Cooperative Extension Service on the campus of Alabama Polytechnic Institute (now Auburn University), along with personnel from the United States Department of Agriculture and the Federal Art Project of the WPA, to lay out the themes for the ambitious endeavor. With assistance from fellow Mobile artist Richebourg Gaillard Jr. (1906–2007), Walker produced ten large tempera paintings on canvas collectively titled the *Historical Panorama of Alabama Agriculture*. He installed the brilliantly colored scenes in mural fashion inside a fairground pavilion, with decorative bunting suspended between each panel and draped as garlands from the open ceiling crossbeams. By all accounts, it was a distinctive and popular exhibit.

Following their weeklong showing at the State Fair in October 1939, the paintings returned to Auburn where they were placed in storage and all but forgotten until 2006, when the renamed Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES) rediscovered the canvases and featured them during Auburn University's sesquicentennial celebration. Four years later the *Panorama* paintings—originally intended for only a short-lived exposition—were treated by an art conservator to ensure their longevity and transferred to the permanent collection of the Jule Collins Smith Museum of Fine Art at Auburn University. Walker's and Posey's inventive collaboration can now be studied among related paintings as a striking example of New Deal-era public art.

We are pleased to share these works for exhibition at the Alabama State Council on the Arts as part of the ongoing ALABAMA 200 bicentennial celebration. Nearly eighty years since the *Panorama's* initial viewing, we hope that Walker's broad survey of Alabama's history and culture will continue to inspire both pride and optimism.

Dennis Harper

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