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Butter Cows and Butter Buildings: A History of an Unconventional Sculptural Medium

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# Butter Cows and Butter Buildings

## A History of an Unconventional Sculptural Medium

*Pamela H. Simpson*

*With its roots in ancient food molds and table art for Renaissance banquets, butter sculpture in the United States debuted during the centennial and flourished in the first quarter of the twentieth century. As the dairy industry moved from farm to regional cooperative creameries and eventually to national brands, butter sculpture appeared at fairs and expositions. Both amateur and professional sculptors used this unusual medium for busts and portraits, dairy-related subjects, and models of buildings. The ephemeral nature of the medium and the novelty of food as art drew crowds to exhibits advertising butter as the natural, healthy alternative to oleomargarine.*

**I**N 1901, visitors to the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, stood amazed before a refrigerated glass display case at the entrance to the dairy building. Inside the case was an 11 foot long, 5 foot 4 inch tall model of the Minnesota State House sculpted in intricate detail in butter—in fact, in 1,000 pounds of butter (fig. 1). Crowds came daily to gasp in wonder and, probably, as one account claimed, to see if it had melted yet. But the new, electrically run refrigeration system worked perfectly, and the butter model of the capitol lasted for the entire eight months of the fair.<sup>1</sup>

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Even in a subject as understudied as butter sculpture, there is prior work that should be acknowledged. Karal Ann Marling is one of the few scholars who has explored the subject, and I am much in her debt. See the footnotes for citations to her work. I have also received tips, citations, references, and ideas from a number of good friends who also offered hospitality during the past eight years. I am grateful to Marilyn Casto, David and Mary Butler, Betsy Fahlman, Betty Hickox, Delos Hughes, Mike Koop, Helen Langa, Kevin and Anne McCormally, Cindy Mills, Ashley Marano, Kathleen Schowalter, Carolyn Torma, and Laura Voight. I am also grateful to Washington and Lee University for a series of Glenn Grants that supported the research on this project. I would also like to thank the two anonymous readers who offered such a good and helpful critique of this article, and Kasey Grier, who shepherded it through the process to publication.

<sup>1</sup> Minnesota Board of Managers for the Pan-American Exposition at Buffalo, NY, "The Bread and Butter State," in *Report of the Minnesota Board of Managers, May 1–November 1, 1901* (St. Paul, MN: Pioneer Press, 1902), 16–19; *The Dairy Interests of Minnesota: Minnesota's Capitol in Butter* (St. Paul, MN: North Western Line, 1901), brochure in Minnesota Historical Society collection, St. Paul.

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The Minnesota State House butter model may seem at first glance to be another example of the peculiar crop art that appeared at turn-of-the-century international expositions. Agricultural displays often included such things as the knight made of prunes and the Liberty Bell of oranges that graced the 1893 Columbian Exposition, or the model of Fort Snelling covered in apples that was also at the Buffalo Pan-American Exposition, or the temple of corn and the California State House in almonds that appeared at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis. But Buffalo's 1901 Minnesota butter sculpture is important because it is the earliest example of the use of electrical refrigeration in a dairy display as well as the first time a professional sculptor was employed to create a butter sculpture for an international exposition. It is a key event in the history of this unconventional medium.

In order to understand how the Minnesota butter model came about, it would be useful to trace briefly the history of butter sculpture and to show how an art form that had its origins as centerpiece displays for Renaissance banquets eventually, in the early twentieth century, became a chief propaganda tool of the newly industrialized dairy industry. Aside from Karal Ann Marling's work on butter sculpture in Minnesota, there has been little published on this subject. The story that is assembled here has been culled from a variety of sources, including food history, the history of the fairs, and the history of the dairy industry. The results can tell



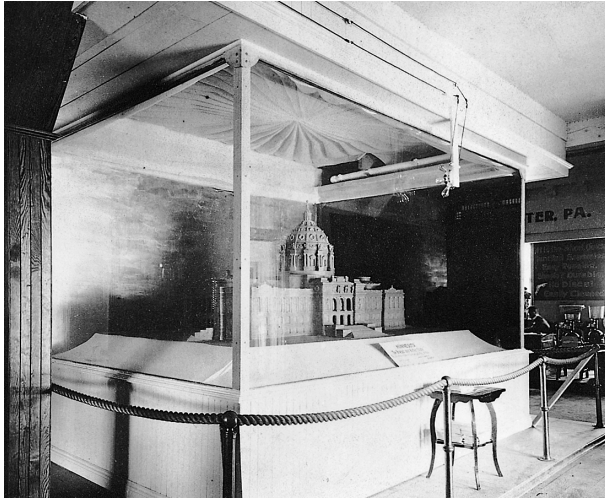


Fig. 1. John K. Daniels, model of the Minnesota State Capitol in Butter, 1901, Pan-American Exposition, Buffalo, NY. (Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.)

us much about how a peculiar form of popular art ended up serving an important industry.

### Butter Sculpture as Banquet Art

While butter sculpture is a very understudied subject, an extensive search of the literature on food and banquet history reveals tantalizing references to its origins. It is part of a long tradition of fanciful food constructions that have decorated the tables of the wealthy since ancient times. Archaeologists, for example, have uncovered molds to shape breads and puddings into animal and human shapes at sites from Babylon to Roman Britain.<sup>2</sup> The heyday of food ornament, however, was during the Renaissance and Baroque periods when butter sculpture sometimes accompanied the much more common sugar art as an adornment for banquets. Known as “trionfi” and “sotelties,” food sculpture was a form of entertainment brought in to punctuate certain phases of the feast.<sup>3</sup> Take, for example, the recipe that Robert May included in his 1685 book, *The Accomplisht Cook*, where he presented the details for making a sugar-paste castle with battlements and

<sup>2</sup> Phyllis Pray Bober, *Art, Culture, and Cuisine: Ancient and Medieval Gastronomy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 66–67; also George C. Boon, “A Roman Pastry Cook’s Mould from Silchester,” *Antiquaries Journal* 38 (July 1958): 237–40.

<sup>3</sup> Margret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner* (London: Penguin, 1991), 200–201; Sara M. Pennell, “The Material Culture of Food in Early Modern England, c. 1650–1750” (PhD diss., St. Catherine’s College, Oxford, 1997), 225. For a seventeenth-century example, see Robert May, “Triumphs and Trophies in Cookery, to be used at Festival Times,” in *The Accomplisht Cook* (London: Obadiah Blagrave, 1685).

stag filled with claret that would “cause much delight and pleasure to the whole company.”<sup>4</sup> The earliest known reference to butter sculpture being used in this manner was a century earlier, in 1536, when Bartolomeo Scappi, cook to Pope Pius V, organized a feast that included nine elaborate scenes, which were carried in episodically as changing centerpieces for the banquet. The sugar art included Diana with her dogs and nymphs and Paris and Helen with the goddesses, but the important thing for this study is that Scappi also mentions several butter sculptures, including an elephant with a palanquin, a figure of Hercules struggling with a lion, and one of a Moor on a camel.<sup>5</sup> The fact that the centerpieces were on the table for only a short time explains how butter sculpture could be part of the tradition of table art even in warm climates and in the days before mechanical refrigeration; it had to be on the table only long enough to impress the guests and could be removed before melting.

Another Italian reference to the use of butter art as a banquet feature comes from the biography of the sculptor Antonio Canova (1757–1822). He was reported to have first come to his patron’s attention when as a humble kitchen boy he modeled an impressive butter lion for a centerpiece (fig. 2). Recent Canova biographers have dismissed the story as a period trope similar to the story of the young Giotto first attracting attention by drawing on a rock. (The theme here is one of extraordinary talent being discovered at an early age and lifting the young artist out of his humble origins.) Nevertheless, the fact that butter sculpture was a part of the tale indicates its familiarity as a banquet feature.<sup>6</sup>

Butter sculpture seems to have been much more common in northern Europe, where butter and dairying traditions were strong and the climate more forgiving. In England, the appearance of small butter pats molded into decorative shapes was a frequent

<sup>4</sup> May, “Triumphs and Trophies in Cookery.”

<sup>5</sup> Bartolomeo Scappi, *Opera* (1570; Venice: Alessandro de Vecchi, 1622), cited in Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner*, 201. This is the earliest reference to butter sculpture that I have yet found.

<sup>6</sup> David Finn and Fred Licht, *Canova* (New York: Abbeville, 1983), 18. Licht refers to the tale as “charming and probably spurious.” The story of a young boy making a butter lion recurs again in the biography of the early nineteenth-century American sculptor Horatio Greenough. As a young boy, Greenough reportedly astonished the guests at his mother’s tea by using a spoon to carve a block of butter into a lion. Nathalia Wright, *Horatio Greenough, the first American Sculptor* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1963), 21. The Canova legend is also cited in Carolyn Wells Dall, “Women’s Work,” in *Letters from Mrs. Dall, Centennials*, vol. 2, n. 39 (September–October 1876). This is a two-volume scrapbook of clippings of Mrs. Dall’s letters to the editor published in *The New Age* (Boston, 1876), Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

Canova, the famous Italian sculptor in early life, being employed to design an ornament to adorn the royal table on a grand occasion, took a large piece of butter and moulded a lion so skillfully that his genius was at once recognized. Nothing, not even Canova's butter lion, could adorn a feast as well as a pound of



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Aurora, Illinois.  
THE LARGEST PRODUCERS OF PURE BUTTER IN THE WORLD

Fig. 2. Advertisement for Clover Hill Butter featuring the legend of Canova and the butter lion. *Cosmopolitan*, April 1899. (Author's collection.)

feature at dinner parties by the eighteenth century; by then, the practice extended to the middle class as well as the wealthy. A biography of the famous English neoclassical sculptor Joseph Nollekens (1737–1823) gives further evidence of this tradition.

Nollekens's biographer, a former student, recounts that one day a pretty young woman appeared at the sculptor's door asking for a critique of her butter sculpture. She had a basket full of her little figures and animals. People had told her she was very good at making them, and she thought that with some real instruction from a professional artist she might become even better, increase her earnings, and have a chance for a position as a housekeeper. Nollekens was ready to help her, but, according to the biographer, Mrs. Nollekens squelched the idea since the young woman was far too pretty to be left alone with the sculptor.<sup>7</sup>

What is significant in all three of these examples—the Scappi reference to his banquet art, the tale of the youthful Canova's butter lion, and the Nollekens anecdote about the dairymaid—is the fact that butter sculpture was obviously common enough to be discussed without explanation or comment. These are some of the earliest references to butter art, but they assume that the reader knew what the writer was describing. Butter sculpture was apparently so common that its history was taken for granted; modern scholars thus have to read between the lines to discover its early history. Fortunately, this is a situation that begins to change in the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

#### Nineteenth-Century Butter Art at the Fairs

In the nineteenth century, butter art moved from the banquet table to the display case when it became a feature at international expositions. The earliest example appeared at the 1876 Centennial

<sup>7</sup> John Thomas Smith, *Nollekens and His Times* (1828; London: Oxford University Press, 1929), 66–67.

<sup>8</sup> There is one other form that should be mentioned, at least as an aside. Butter sculpture has been a popular Buddhist ritual in Tibet from at least the fifteenth century. Monks modeled mandala images of flowers, animals, and deities in yak butter during the colder months and stored them in caves. The sculpture was brought out as part of a summer festival and allowed to melt, symbolizing the ephemeral nature of life, beauty, and art. As fascinating as this is, and it continues today, it is less than clear that there is any connection between the Tibetan rituals and the banquet art of the West. See John Powers, "The Butter-Sculpture Festival of Kumbum," in *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1995), 193–97; Robert B. Ekvall, *Religious Observances in Tibet: Patterns and Function* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 174–76.



Exhibition in Philadelphia, where Caroline Shawk Brooks (1840–1913), a farm woman from Helena, Arkansas, displayed the *Dreaming Iolanthe*, a bas-relief bust she had modeled in butter (fig. 3).<sup>9</sup> To keep it from melting she set it into a shallow milk pan and fitted another one filled with ice below. The ice required frequent replacement, but the butter sculpture managed to last for several months of display. Housed in the women's pavilion, the butter bust drew much attention. Commentators praised Brooks for “exceeding delicacy and brilliance of manipulation,”<sup>10</sup> and found the work especially impressive since Brooks was a “native talent,” a lady with “no regular instruction in art.”<sup>11</sup>

Caroline Brooks was married to an Arkansas farmer and, like most farm wives, was in charge of the butter making. It was common practice to mold butter into small, decorative shapes—the many wooden butter molds that survive from this period are testament to that. But Mrs. Brooks had a different idea for her butter art. Since 1867 she had been modeling portraits in butter and exhibiting them locally and regionally. It was initially a means of drawing attention to her butter and helping to market it, but it became something she thought of as art. In 1873 she produced her masterpiece, the *Dreaming Iolanthe*, and she frequently exhibited replicas of it.<sup>12</sup> In 1874, the *New York Times* reported



Fig. 3. Caroline S. Brooks, *Dreaming Iolanthe: A Study in Butter*, 1876, Centennial Exhibition, Philadelphia. The reverse notes that tools used were a common butter paddle, cedar sticks, broom straws, and camel's hair pencil. (Author's collection.)

<sup>9</sup> “A Rare Exhibit,” in *Centennial Collection Scrapbook*, vol. 30, Philadelphia Historical Society. This is an 1876 newspaper clipping pasted in the scrapbook; it has a line-cut image of the sculpture and tells the plot of *King Rene's Daughter* by Henrik Hertz (1798–1870), a Danish poet. Iolanthe was a princess protected from all knowledge of her blindness by her royal parents. She eventually discovered her handicap when she met the man she would fall in love with. The sculpture depicts her last dreaming moment before she awakens to learn the truth. The lyric drama was first published in Denmark in 1845 and was translated into English the same year. Eventually the drama was translated into every European language. It was published in the United States in 1850 in a translation taken from the German by Theodore Martin. This was the translation that Brooks read. By 1869 the play was being performed in New York. The book version went through many editions. Tchaikovsky saw a Russian translation of the play in 1888 and made it into an opera, *Iolanta*, in 1892. In the story, Iolanthe's sight is miraculously restored by a surgical operation on the eve of her wedding, furthering the symbolism of a new awakening implied in Brooks's piece (bibliographic material derived from a WorldCat search). I have written a fuller account of Brooks's career (Pamela H. Simpson, “Caroline Shawk Brooks, the ‘Butter Woman’”) for the *Woman's Art Journal* (forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> Frank H. Hutton, *Illustrated Historical Register of the Centennial Exhibition* (New York: American New Co., 1879), 156.

<sup>11</sup> James D. McCabe, *Illustrated History of the Centennial Exhibition* (Philadelphia: J. R. Jones, 1876), 219.

<sup>12</sup> *Daily Star* (Cincinnati), March 25, 1874; *Herald and Register* (Cincinnati), March 4, 1874, and March 11, 1874; clippings in curator's file, Chicago Historical Society; and the *New Century for*

on one such exhibit in Cincinnati.<sup>13</sup> Her success led the organizers of the women's pavilion at the centennial to invite her to send her butter sculpture to the exposition.<sup>14</sup>

The *Dreaming Iolanthe* drew so much attention at the centennial that the officials invited her to

*Women* 11 (July 1876): 84–85. This was an interview she gave for the official newspaper of the Women's Pavilion. Stereopticon images of the sculpture in the author's collection record that the piece was “sculptured on a kitchen table without a model, in a milk pan 15 inches in diameter” and that the piece used nine pounds of butter.

<sup>13</sup> *New York Times*, February 27, 1876.

<sup>14</sup> Clio Harper, *Caroline Shawk Brooks: The Story of the Remarkable Sculptor and Her Work* (booklet labeled “reprint for Press Publications” and dated Nov. 1, 1893), Chicago Historical Society (CHS). No place of publication is given for this small booklet, and the date of the publication is a problem since there is also an appendix with notes from 1896 newspaper articles and a 1900 *Appleton's Cyclopedia* article. While the Harper essay seems to be from 1893, the presence of the other items indicates that the date of putting all of the material together in this binding is certainly after 1900. Harper's article is apparently a reprint, but I have not been able to locate the original source. Some of the details in the Harper account differ from those in the *New Century for Women* cited above. There they say she did her first *Dreaming Iolanthe* in 1868, but Harper says it was 1873. Newspaper accounts of the time support the later date. There are three photographs of versions of the *Dreaming Iolanthe* in the CHS photographic file; one is dated 1873, one 1876, and one 1893. They vary considerably.

demonstrate her technique in the main exhibit building. Brooks began by kneading the raw butter in a bowl and proceeded with the creation of another version of the butter relief. Brooks sold a *carte de visite* photographic image of the bust along with a descriptive pamphlet as a means of recouping her expenses.<sup>15</sup>

A woman journalist writing for a Boston paper, *The New Age*, saw the *Dreaming Iolanthe* at the centennial and praised its charm, while also pointing out the two traditions that lay behind it. One was the legend about Canova creating his butter lion and the other was contemporary dairy practice. “There is scarce a farm house with bright dairymaids,” she wrote, “that would not find them molding [their butter into] a clover leaf or lily.”<sup>16</sup> Canova represented a professional tradition of art-making, while the dairymaids were a more amateur and commercial one. Brooks offered a transition between the two. She may have been a farmer’s wife when she first exhibited at the centennial, but she clearly had more ambition for her butter art. After the centennial, she studied in Paris and Florence and eventually became a professional sculptor who worked in marble, but she never abandoned her butter art. She always claimed it was a more sensitive material for modeling and better for casting than traditional clay.<sup>17</sup> At the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition, Brooks was there again, this time putting on a display of butter modeling in the Florida building, where she did portraits of Queen Isabella and Columbus (fig. 4).<sup>18</sup>

What was new at the Columbian Exposition was that Brooks was not the only butter sculptor. Laura Worley had four butter portraits of exposition officials in the Indiana exhibit, Ruth Woodruff created a garden of butter flowers complete with a fence for the Illinois dairy display, and Mrs. G. H. McDowell of Minneapolis supplied “some very pretty ornamental work,” modeling flowers, vines, a bas-relief cow, and a box churn for the Minnesota dairy section.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> “The Centennial,” *The Advertiser* (Boston), August 12, 1876; newspaper clipping in curator’s files for Caroline Shawk Brooks, Chicago Historical Society. Copies of the pamphlet and the photograph are also in the files.

<sup>16</sup> Dall, “Women’s Work.”

<sup>17</sup> “Mrs. Caroline Brooks’s Return from Paris,” *Daily Constitution* (Atlanta), March 21, 1879; Harper, *Caroline Shawk Brooks*.

<sup>18</sup> Caroline Shawk Brooks Photographic Collection, call no. 1949.0354 PPL, Chicago Historical Society Research Center; Mary L. Sherman, “The World’s Fair: ‘The Butter Woman’ and Her Exhibit,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 29, 1893.

<sup>19</sup> “World’s Fair Notes,” *Woman’s Journal* 23 (December 10, 1892): 398, for Worley; Diary of Catherine Ferry Haviland at the Columbian Exposition, book 5, September 7, 1893, for Woodruff



Fig. 4. Detail of Caroline S. Brooks demonstrating her butter-modeling technique with a bas-relief of Columbus for the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. (Chicago Historical Society.)

The difference between Chicago and Philadelphia was that the butter sculpture was no longer consigned to the women’s building; it now was a part of official state displays in the agricultural section, where, as commentators noted, it “attracts the attention of visitors who would not be likely to show any special interest in tubs and jars of butter.”<sup>20</sup> Butter sculpture had shifted from homegrown artistry to industrial display. We do not know much about Worley, Woodruff, or McDowell, but the fact that their art was meant to boost their state’s dairy interests marks the moment that butter art began to serve the newly expanding industry.

#### Advertising for the Dairy Industry

The dairy industry was undergoing dramatic change at the time. Until the late 1880s, dairying had remained a home industry, largely in the hands of women. Butter was retailed directly from the farm

reference (originally accessed at a Web site that is no longer available); and “Minnesota’s Dairy Exhibit,” *Northwest Illustrated Monthly Magazine* (October 1893), 15–16, for McDowell. See also Karal Ann Marling, “The Origins of Minnesota Butter Sculpture,” *Minnesota History* 50 (Summer 1987): 225–26, 227, and *Blue Ribbon: A Social and Pictorial History of the Minnesota State Fair* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1990), 49.

<sup>20</sup> “Minnesota’s Dairy Exhibit,” 16.

to consumers in nearby towns or sold through grocery stores for local distribution. Change began in the late nineteenth century with the development of cooperative creameries, the introduction of new centrifugal cream separators, pasteurization, and the Babcock test for butterfat. New scientific interest in quality control, new tests to assure that quality, and new methods for mechanized production eventually moved butter making from the farm to the factory.<sup>21</sup> In the last years of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth, these regional cooperatives grew into the large companies whose names are familiar to us today—Beatrice Foods, Meadow Gold, Land O' Lakes, and so on. Beatrice started in Nebraska in 1893, but grew to be a national conglomerate. Meadow Gold, founded as a creamery in Kansas in 1901, joined with Beatrice in 1905. Land O' Lakes was founded in 1921 as a cooperative to sell butter made by its fifteen member creameries. When it incorporated in 1925, it had 476 creameries with some 73,000 members, and in that year did over \$38 million in business.<sup>22</sup> As the companies formed, expanded, and began to advertise, butter sculpture became one of their means of promotion. At state fairs, international expositions, and at the numerous national and international dairy congresses and meetings, butter sculpture proved an effective and novel means of advertising their product. As the commentator at the Columbian Exposition had noted in 1893, people who might not pay much attention to a tub of butter stopped and took note when they saw it being used as a sculptural medium.

One early example of such industry-sponsored displays was the work of E. Frances Milton of St. Paul, Minnesota. For the 1898 Minnesota State Fair, she modeled a 500-pound mass of butter into a monument to recent American military victories. Unfortunately, no photographs of this have been found, though the newspapers provide a very full description: an allegorical group of a standing Columbia protecting a fallen soldier stood atop a pedestal that was adorned with bas-reliefs depict-

ing the battles of Santiago and Manila. The *Charge of the Rough Riders* was noted as being particularly beautiful. Milton, the wife of the owner of the Milton Dairy Company, also had other butter sculpture in the glass case at the 1898 fair, including a wreath, fruit, and a spider web—all described as being the “cleverest of exhibits.”<sup>23</sup> Ice and fans cooled the case. Milton continued to do annual butter displays for the Minnesota State Fair until 1903.

Minnesota was a major dairy state, but it was not the only place where butter sculpture appeared during this period. At most of the annual fairs, “ornamental butter” was one of the regular categories. But Minnesota was a primary player in this transformation of an art that started with gifted amateurs who had some connection with dairying and developed into a form of advertising made by professional artists.

#### Professional Butter Sculptors and the Early Twentieth-Century Fairs

The best example of this professionalization is the work of John K. Daniels (1875–1918), the butter sculptor who created the Minnesota State House butter model for the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo in 1901. Born in Norway, Daniels immigrated to the United States with his family when he was nine. He grew up in St. Paul and trained there in several art schools and with two different sculptors before setting up his own studio. He worked in stone, wood, and bronze. Then, in 1900, apparently to make some extra money, he started doing butter sculpture for the Minnesota State Fair.<sup>24</sup> His fame, however, came in 1901 when he did the spectacular model of the Minnesota Capitol (see fig. 1). The State House, designed by renowned architect Cass Gilbert, was still unfinished in 1901, but it was the pride of the state. The board of managers for

<sup>21</sup> Edward Wiest, “The Butter Industry in the U.S.” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1916); Walter Martin Kollmorgen, “The Butter Industry in Nebraska,” *Bulletin* 16 (March 1938): 5, 8 (Conservation Department of Nebraska, Lincoln).

<sup>22</sup> T. R. Pirtle, *The History of the Dairy Industry* (Chicago: Mojonner Bros., 1926), 157; *Land O' Lakes Creameries: Its Organization, Nature, and History* (Minneapolis: Land O' Lakes Creameries, 1934). Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul. An inquiry with the company produced the claim that they had no record of sponsoring butter sculpture. They may not, but the newspapers show that they certainly did sponsor such exhibits.

<sup>23</sup> “Exhibit of Fancy Butter,” *St. Paul Globe*, September 18, 1898; also cited in Marling, “The Origins of Minnesota Butter Sculpture,” 227, and *Blue Ribbon*, 63. A trade card from the 1925 Minnesota State Fair claimed that the Milton Dairy Company had been exhibiting butter sculpture annually for thirty-one years. That would mean they had first sponsored a butter sculpture display in 1894, the year after the Columbian Exposition (author's collection).

<sup>24</sup> “John K. Daniels, “Famous Sculptor Dies at 103,” *Minneapolis Tribune*, March 10, 1978; “Pioneers Statue Carver Speaks Out,” *Minneapolis Star*, September 25, 1965, clipping in Biography Files, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul. Daniels's butter sculpture was frequently mentioned by the local press in their coverage of the annual state fair exhibits from 1900 to 1930. His work was also reproduced on advertising cards put out by the dairy companies who sponsored the exhibits.



the Minnesota exhibit wanted to show a plaster model, but there was too little time to make one and it seemed it would cost too much—that is, until Daniels stepped forward and offered to do it in butter for \$2,000. Daniels may not have realized what he was getting into. He and his assistants had to work fifteen-hour days for six weeks in a glass case kept at 35 degrees to make the model. The sculptors said they were “chilled to the bone” and had to take frequent breaks to warm their hands. Initially, the temperature was maintained with ice, but by the time the piece was finished, the fair’s electrical refrigeration system was in place and took over, keeping the model well preserved for the whole length of the exposition—some eight months rather than the normal week or two of a state fair. The “hundreds of thousands” of visitors who came to marvel at the exhibit also carried away a souvenir pamphlet prepared by the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis & Omaha Railroad. The brochure not only pictured the butter model and described its making, but also included statistics on the dairy counties in the state. As the official report noted, visitors carried this publication home as “indisputable proof” that Minnesota was the nation’s “bread and butter state.”<sup>25</sup>

Daniels followed that triumph with an even more impressive exhibit at the St. Louis Louisiana Purchase Exposition in 1904. St. Louis produced the biggest dairy display of any international exposition to date. A whole building was devoted to the industry. On one side of a long aisle was the story of the making of butter from cow to finished product, with every step illustrated by live demonstrations. On the other side, in a refrigerated, glassed-in section, was the butter sculpture. Every state with a dairy interest was represented. For Minnesota, Daniels modeled two life-size pieces: a figural group of Father Hennepin and his two guides in a canoe discovering the St. Anthony Falls (fig. 5) and a woman on a pedestal offering a slice of buttered bread to her young son. As one Minnesota newspaper noted, “There is not an exhibit that attracts more attention and does more good advertising than these two butter models” that represent the “principal industry” of the state.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Minnesota Board of Managers, “The Bread and Butter State,” 16–19; *The Dairy Interests of Minnesota*, brochure in Minnesota Historical Society collection, St. Paul.

<sup>26</sup> “Minnesota Butter at St. Louis,” *St. Paul Farmer*, 1904, newspaper clipping in *Minnesota Board of Managers World’s Fair Scrapbook* (St. Louis, 1904), Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.



Fig. 5. John K. Daniels, butter sculpture of Father Hennepin and guides discovering St. Anthony Falls. Minnesota exhibit, Louisiana Purchase Exposition, St. Louis, 1904. David Francis, *The Universal Exposition of 1904* (St. Louis: Louisiana Purchase Exposition Collection, 1913), 2:181. (Author’s collection.)

Other states would have agreed that the butter sculpture was an effective means of advertising; that is why so many of them participated. Wisconsin showed a dairymaid and her cow. Washington state exhibited a dairymaid milking the cow and squirting a stream to a hungry kitten (fig. 6). Missouri offered an elaborate group with a three-dimensional Ceres holding a scythe accompanied by cows with a bas-relief background of the state seal and images illustrating the state’s agricultural prowess. Nebraska’s sculpture was a cornucopia; Iowa had flowers and a small model of its new state dairy college; Kansas had a model of its new agricultural college along with a life-size image of a dairymaid dressed in old-fashioned clothes churning butter, while a woman in modern dress used a cream separator. There were at least two Teddy Roosevelt portraits: a portrait bust from New York and an equestrian statue from North Dakota. All of this was in butter.<sup>27</sup>

While the displays at the great international fairs were the most impressive, Daniels and others

<sup>27</sup> Mark Bennett, ed., *The History of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition* (St. Louis: Universal Exposition Pub. Co., 1905), 648 (for general description) and 411 (for Kansas exhibit); also, *Report of the Missouri Commission to the Louisiana Purchase Exposition*, February 1905 (Jefferson City, MO: Hugh Stephens Printing Co., 1905), 242–43. The Missouri sculpture was by M. P. Neilson of St. Louis. The Roosevelt bust was modeled by C. F. Froliche of New York, and while we do not know who modeled the North Dakota equestrian Roosevelt, images of it suggest that it may have been inspired by the famous Frederic Remington 1898 painting, *The Charge of the Rough Riders*. Roosevelt was the sitting president at the time of the fair. Also see stereopticon collection, Library of Congress.

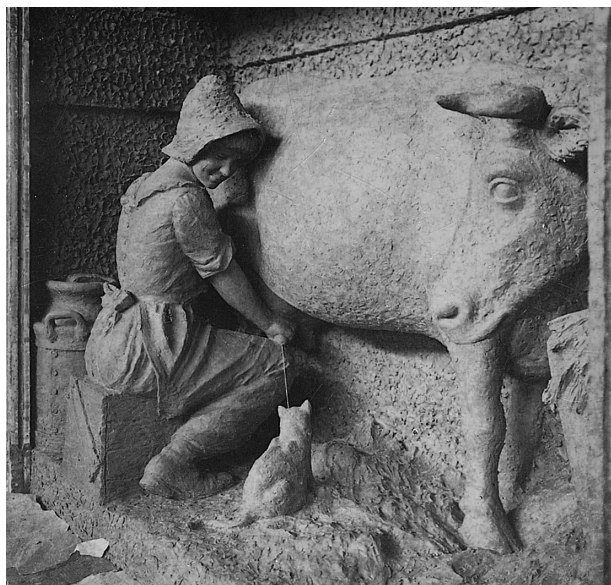


Fig. 6. Detail of stereopticon image of bas-relief butter sculpture of a dairymaid milking a cow. Washington state dairy exhibit, Louisiana Purchase Exposition, St. Louis, 1904. (Author's collection.)

continued to make sculpture for the state fairs and the national dairy meetings as well. Sponsored by the various creamery companies, he provided many butter cows, including a popular one of a little boy trying to get the mother cow to accept a calf

while several chickens pecked nearby (fig. 7).<sup>28</sup> He also regularly made a butter portrait of the sitting governor for the Minnesota fair, and in 1906 he modeled portraits of the Wisconsin governor, the secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the mayor of Chicago for the National Butter Makers Convention and Dairy Show at the Chicago Coliseum (fig. 8). In honor of the visit Teddy Roosevelt made to the Minnesota State Fair in 1910, he was commissioned by the Milton Dairy Company to do a portrait of the former president dressed in safari garb and standing triumphant, gun in hand, over a dead lion (fig. 9).<sup>29</sup> In the 1930s, Mrs. Lu

<sup>28</sup> Advertising card, sponsored by the Beatrice Creamery Co., Des Moines, IA, 1911, in author's collection. There is another card with an identical sculptural group from the Minnesota State Fair in 1911. The Milton Dairy sponsored this one. It seems Daniels was willing to recreate a popular piece more than once and for different customers, or else he found some way to move the sculpture. The *Creamery Journal* reported in 1909 that the Minnesota state dairy and food commission sponsored a butter model of the Minnesota capitol at the state fair that year. There was no mention of the sculptor. It seems unlikely that this could have been the same model exhibited in Buffalo in 1901, but it might have been another replica made by Daniels; see *Creamery Journal* 20 (September 16, 1909): 4.

<sup>29</sup> For the butter portraits of the Minnesota governors, see "The Governor 'In Butter,'" *Minneapolis Journal*, September 4, 1907; "Fair Butter Exhibits Never Excelled in State," *Minneapolis Journal*, September 4, 1921; "Butter Statues, Dairy Feature of State Fair," *St. Paul Dispatch*, September 6, 1922. For the Chicago display, see *Creamery Journal* 17 (March 1, 1906): 13, and *Chicago Daily News*,

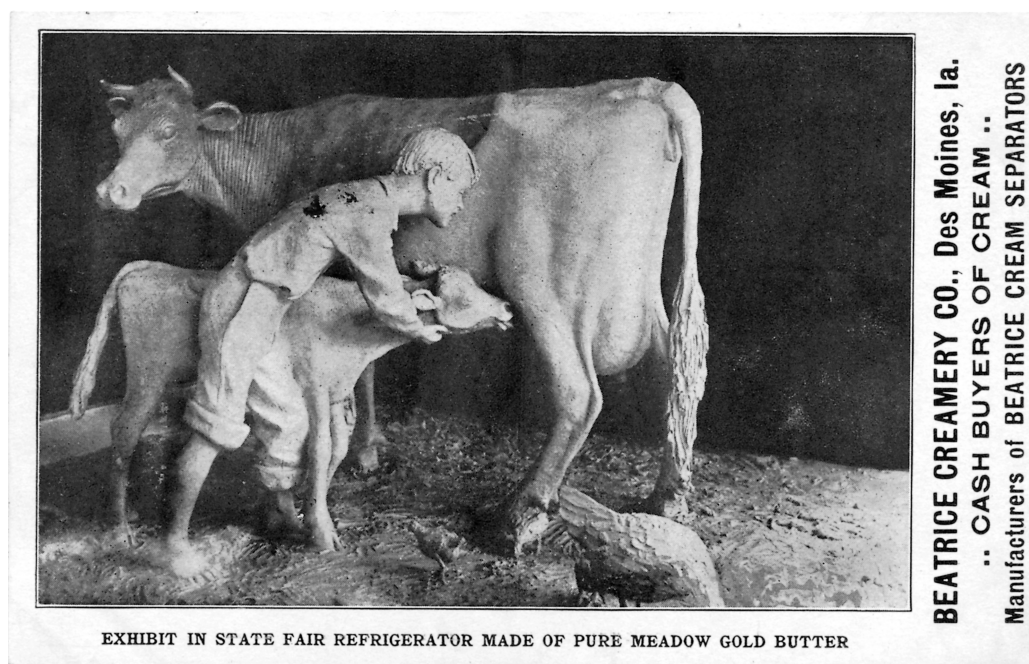


Fig. 7. Postcard of John K. Daniels's butter sculpture of a boy, cow, and calf, Iowa State Fair, 1911. Sponsored by Beatrice Creamery Co. (Author's collection.)



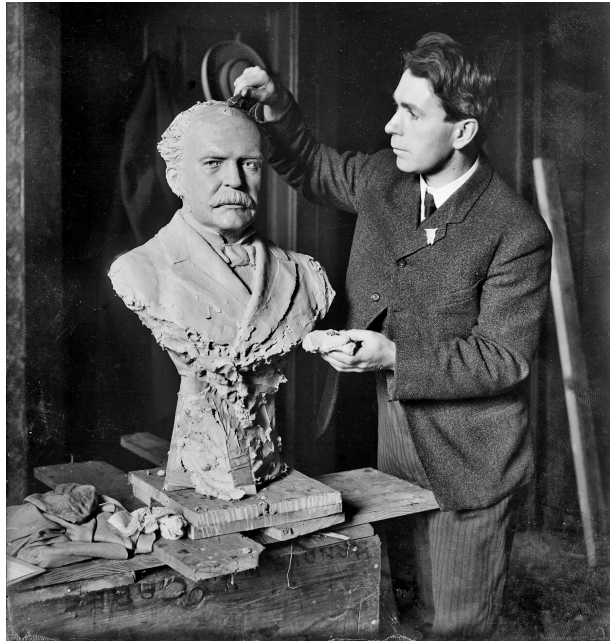


Fig. 8. Detail of John K. Daniels modeling the bust of Edward F. Dunne, mayor of Chicago. *Chicago Daily News*, February 14, 1906. (Chicago Historical Society.)

Verharan Lavell, another professionally trained artist from Minneapolis, replaced Daniels as the Minnesota fair's butter sculptor. Local papers often carried pictures of her dressed in a fur coat, working on her latest sculpture in the refrigerated lockers of the Land O' Lakes headquarters building in Minneapolis. She would prepare the sculpture there in August, and it would be transferred to the state fairgrounds in St. Paul in September.<sup>30</sup>

Another butter artist active in this period was J. E. Wallace. Listed in the Lincoln, Nebraska, city directories as a sculptor and taxidermist, he was active from 1914 to 1955 providing butter sculpture for fairs in Iowa, Texas, Kansas, Nebraska, Ohio, Illinois, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Trade publications such as the *Creamery Journal* often noted his work: "J. E. Wallace, nationally known butter sculptor, did his usual bit by forming a piece of

February 14, 1906, copy in Chicago Historical Society photographic collection. For Roosevelt, see "Roosevelt's Statue Moulded in Butter," *St. Paul Dispatch*, September 5, 1910. The Roosevelt butter image was also reproduced as an advertising card for the Milton Dairy Co., St. Paul, MN (example in author's collection).

<sup>30</sup> "Statue Carved from Butter for State Fair," *Minneapolis Journal*, September 1, 1934; "Sculptress Bundles Up, Carves Cow Out of Butter," *Minneapolis Journal*, August 28, 1938. The articles note that this was the eighth year for Mrs. Lavell to do the butter statuary for the fair. It also notes that she is well known in local art circles as a sculptor and portrait painter.



Fig. 9. Postcard of John K. Daniels's butter sculpture of Teddy Roosevelt, Minnesota State Fair, 1910. Sponsored by Milton Dairy. (Author's collection.)

butter statuary," declared the journal in 1926.<sup>31</sup> Butter cows, cows with milkmaids, or little boys with calves were popular subjects, but he also did portraits and novelty displays such as the equestrian *Old Hickory* for the Tennessee Fair in 1922 (fig. 10). In 1923, Wallace made a 600-pound butter cow for the Adams County Fair in Hastings, Nebraska. It was the first time, he said, that he had ever worked for a fair smaller than a state or national one; but, having recently moved to Hastings, he decided to donate his efforts to help his new community. Several local creameries supplied the butter and sponsored the effort. A new, refrigerated glass case at the fairgrounds made the life-size butter sculpture possible. As soon as Wallace finished the piece he

<sup>31</sup> "Seventeenth Dairy Cattle Congress a Success," *Creamery Journal* 37 (October 1, 1926): 8.

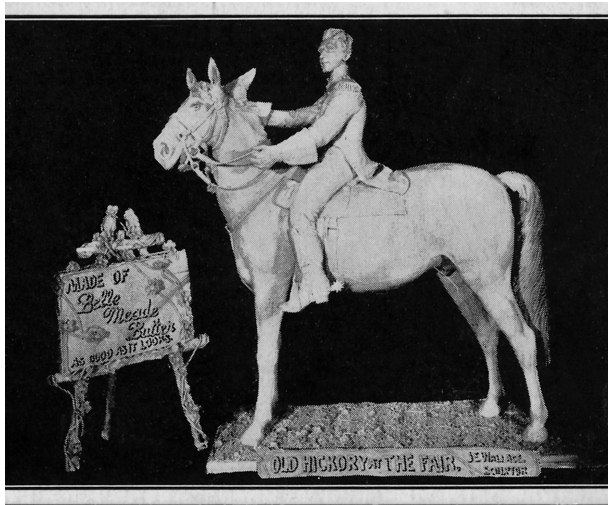


Fig. 10. Detail of postcard of J. E. Wallace's butter sculpture *Old Hickory*, Tennessee State Fair, 1922. Sponsored by Belle Meade Butter Co. (Author's collection.)

had to rush off to catch the train to Montreal, where he sculpted another butter cow for an international dairy convention.<sup>32</sup>

Daniels, Lavell, and Wallace were all trained as artists, worked in other materials as well as butter, and were paid for their efforts. They represent the professionalization of butter sculpture. Even some well-known sculptors such as Lorado Taft and Mahonri Young reported doing the occasional butter sculpture in their youth to earn some quick money. Taft did a portrait for an 1890 Masonic fair in Detroit; Young did a butter maid for the 1906 Utah State Fair.<sup>33</sup>

While we do not know who made them, the size and quality of the butter art at two expositions

<sup>32</sup> Advertising cards in author's collection give examples of the various pieces he did. See also the *Hastings Daily Tribune* (July 2, 10, and 14, 1923) for an account of Wallace's work at the Adams County Fair. He was also often cited in reviews for the annual Dairy Cattle Congress in Waterloo, Iowa; see *Creamery Journal* 37 (February 1, 1926): 8, and 39 (September 15, 1928): 10. He is listed in the Lincoln, Nebraska, city directories for 1917–20 as a sculptor and taxidermist (letter from reference librarian, Lincoln City Libraries, Lincoln, NE). The displays illustrated by the advertising cards in the author's collection sometimes include a board with the sculptor's name and place of residence. Wallace listed himself as being from Lincoln, then Hastings, then Chicago, and later, in the 1940s, as being from Deland, FL. He died there on December 9, 1956 (letter from Mrs. J. E. Wallace to R. H. Jardine, manager for Ontario Cream Producers Marketing Board, March 22, 1957, in the Ross Butler Museum archives, Woodstock, ON).

<sup>33</sup> Lorado Taft (1860–1936) is best known for his 1903 book, *The History of American Sculpture*, but he was also an active sculptor in the early twentieth century with many public commissions. Taft's butter sculpture is cited in Marling, "The Origins of Minnesota Butter Sculpture," 223, n. 17. She cites an 1890 letter from Taft (University Archives, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign). Mahonri Young (1877–1957) was from Salt Lake City and had a

in London would also indicate the presence of professional sculptors. The 1908 Franco-British Exhibition included a life-size statue of the king shaking hands with the French president, a tableau of Jacques Cartier and his companions landing in Quebec (it was the 400th anniversary of this event; fig. 11), and a display of fruit and flowers—all in butter.<sup>34</sup> The Canadian Dairy Association sponsored the sculptures, so the makers were probably Canadian as well. At the 1924 British Empire show, Australia had a dairy case with a butter tableau of a cricket game featuring their national star, Jack Hobbs. Canada was there, this time with a spectacular life-size statue of the Prince of Wales and his horse standing before a bas-relief landscape depicting the prince's Canadian ranch, complete with a log cabin (fig. 12). The newspapers reported that when the royal family visited the display, Queen Mary laughed delightedly and repeated, "How amusing, how amusing." The king asked the more practical question, "How long will it last?"<sup>35</sup>

#### The Practical Side of Making Butter Sculpture

The king asked a good question. With proper refrigeration, butter sculpture lasted the length of the fair, usually six to eight months; then the butter either would be stored and later reused for more butter sculpture, recycled into animal feed or non-edible uses, or sometimes it was even washed and repasteurized to be sold.<sup>36</sup>

very successful career in New York as the modeler of small statues of men at work. The butter figure was for the Utah State Fair in 1906; see Norma S. Davis, *A Song of Joys: The Biography of Mahonri Mackintosh Young* (Provo, UT: M. Seth and Maurine D. Horne Center for the Study of Art, Brigham Young University Museum of Art, 1999), 98. This was brought to my attention by Betsy Fahlman. Another professional sculptor who did at least one piece in butter was Gilbert P. Riswold (1881–1938), a native of South Dakota who was one of Taft's pupils. Riswold is best known for memorial statues in Illinois, South Dakota, and Utah, but he did "A Study in Nature" for the 1916 Springfield, Massachusetts, National Dairy Show. Sponsored by the Blue Valley Creamery, his tableau included a cow, woman, and child in a rural setting (postcard, in the author's possession).

<sup>34</sup> Postcards in the author's collection; *Report of the Dairy and Cold Storage Commissioner, 1909* (Ottawa, ON: C. H. Parmelee, 1909), 24, 144, 160; "Models in Butter," *London Daily Mail*, June 11, 1908.

<sup>35</sup> "Kings and Queens at Wembley," *London Daily Mail*, May 29, 1924; see also "A Small Boy at Wembley," *London Daily Mail*, May 19, 1924; G. C. Laurence, *British Empire Exhibit, Official Guide* (London: Fleetway Press, 1924), 64. While the newspapers and official guides described the butter sculpture in wonder and amusement, none mentioned the names of the sculptors. The Australian exhibit is recorded in a trade card (author's collection).

<sup>36</sup> Duffy Lyons, the Iowa butter sculptor, says she reuses her butter for five years. Ross Butler, the Canadian butter sculptor active in the 1940s and 1950s, claimed that his butter was washed,



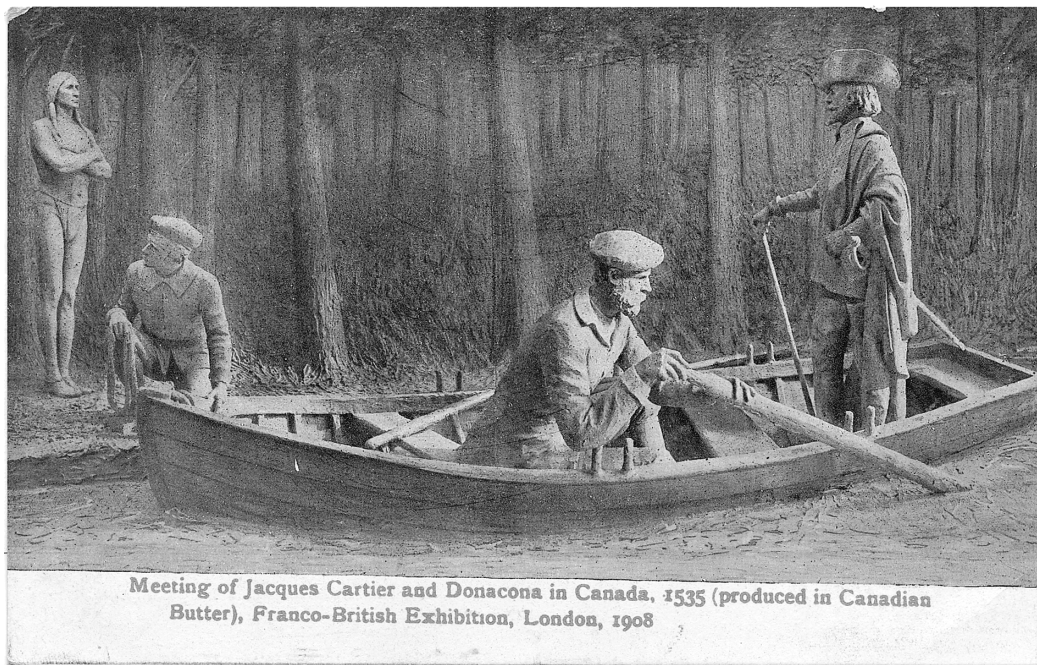


Fig. 11. Postcard of butter sculpture tableau of the meeting of Jacques Cartier and Donnacona, Franco-British Exhibition, London, 1908. Sponsored by the Canadian Dairy Association. (Author's collection.)

The method for sculpting in butter was similar to that for clay modeling. For three-dimensional work, a metal or wooden armature supported the weight; wire mesh or some other material was wrapped around that, and the butter was applied over it. In the early days, it is reported, smaller pieces were sometimes made with a thin layer of butter over a wooden form, but for the big displays, the key was to have as much butter as possible in the piece—something the advertising always boasted about with claims of how many hundreds or thousands of pounds of butter went into the exhibit.<sup>37</sup> Shallow bas-reliefs or small works might be carved out of a solid block, but for the larger pieces, the process always involved an armature for support. The big difference from modeling in clay was that the butter had to be sculpted in temperatures similar to those of a home refrigerator, mid-30s to

repasteurized, and blocked for sale (undated clippings in Ross Butler scrapbooks, Ross Butler Museum archives, Woodstock, ON). Lyons noted that hers went to the rendering plant to be reused for soap; see B. Green, *The Butter Cow Lady* (Des Moines, IA: On Target, 1998), 40–41.

<sup>37</sup> Marie Rowe Dunbar, "She Can Make a Lump of Butter Look Like a Garden of Flowers," *American Magazine*, July 1, 1927, 68. Alice Cooksley, the subject of the article, was one of the early butter sculptors. She reported that when she was growing up in England she saw small, wooden forms being covered with butter. Also cited in Marling, "The Origins of Minnesota Butter Sculpture," 226.

40s.<sup>38</sup> The reporter for one London newspaper joked about finding a group of sculptors laboring away in the refrigerated case in April while it was snowing outside—the gas motor creating the cold inside the case seemed a little redundant given what was happening with the weather. The bundled-up sculptors had to take frequent breaks.<sup>39</sup>

#### Other Butter Sculptors Active in the Twentieth Century

Even with all these professionals at work, amateurs, who came to butter sculpture through a connection with the dairy industry, continued to make contributions to the genre. In the early 1900s, Alice Cooksley, wife of an Illinois creamery manager, started turning butter into delicately colored flower arrangements in the cold workrooms of her husband's company during the evening hours. She

<sup>38</sup> Caroline Brooks managed to keep her sculpture cool with ice both at the Centennial and at the Columbian Exposition, but it took a lot of ice and constant attention. See Clio Harper, *Caroline Shaw Brooks: The Story of the Remarkable Sculptor and Her Work* (Chicago: Press Publications, 1893), pamphlet in Curator's Files, Chicago Historical Society.

<sup>39</sup> Sir Percival Phillips, "Chilliest Job, Sculptors Work in Cold Storage," *London Daily Mail*, April 14, 1924.

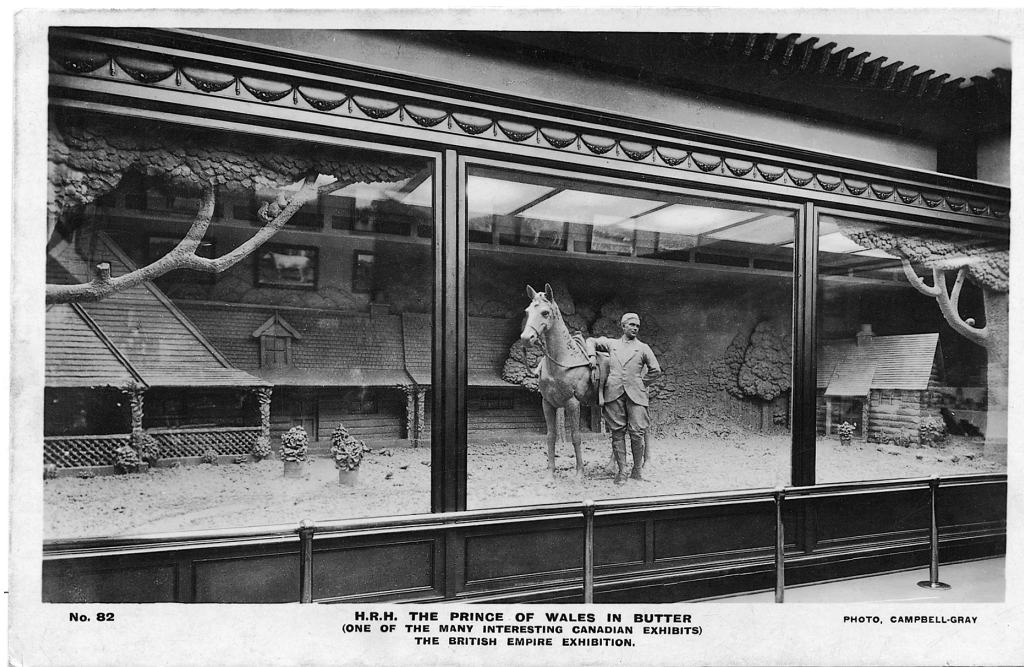


Fig. 12. Postcard of butter sculpture tableau, the Prince of Wales at his Canadian ranch, British Empire Exhibition, 1924. Sponsored by the Canadian Dairy Association. (Author's collection.)

eventually became so well known for her butter flowers that various dairy groups invited her to give demonstrations in some twelve states and Canada between 1911 and 1927. Best known for her work at the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco in 1915 (fig. 13), she started as an amateur, but took courses in both butter making and art to further her skills and even designed her own tools and refrigerated case for the displays.<sup>40</sup>

The period from 1900 to 1930 was the golden age for butter sculpture, but the idea of such novel displays to promote dairy interests has never died out. It was suspended during World War II when there was a butter shortage, but as soon as the war was over, butter sculpture was revived. Ross Butler, a self-taught Canadian artist known for his animal sculptures, began doing butter sculpture for the Canadian dairy industry in 1949. The Dairy Producers of Ontario, the organization that sponsored the exhibits, noted that butter sculpture was an effective means of advertising and of combating the inroads that oleomargarine had made into the dairy market during the war. Nothing drew the "throng of spectators" to a dairy display, they claimed, quite

<sup>40</sup> Dunbar, "She Can Make a Lump of Butter Look Like a Garden of Flowers," 68; also cited in Marling, "The Origins of Minnesota Butter Sculpture," 228, n. 31; and postcards in the author's collection. Cooksley was from England originally.

like butter sculpture.<sup>41</sup> In 1952 Butler did his best-known piece, an equestrian Queen Elizabeth II, for the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto. It drew so much attention that it was featured in newspaper stories around the world. Unfortunately, one British newspaper mistakenly claimed that there were 15,000 pounds of butter in it rather than 1,500 and went on to note that it would be enough "to supply a week's butter ration to 120,000 Britons." The idea of so much butter being wasted in a sculpture drew angry letters from people still facing shortages. Butler countered the story with corrections and protested that the butter was not being wasted but would be recycled.<sup>42</sup>

In Minnesota the tradition of butter sculpture was revived in 1965 at the state fair when the Minnesota Dairy Association decided that a feature of their annual beauty contest (Princess Kay of the Milky Way) would be to honor the winner with a

<sup>41</sup> "Woodstock Sculptor Does Queen's Statue for the Canadian National Exhibit" (newspaper clipping, n.d., Ross Butler Scrapbooks, Ross Butler Museum archives, Woodstock, ON).

<sup>42</sup> David Butler, correspondence with the author, June 17, 2004. See also Butler's Web site on his father, [http://www.oxford.net/~dbutler/but\\_ross.htm](http://www.oxford.net/~dbutler/but_ross.htm), and the Canadian National Exhibition brochure, *Life Size Model of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth and Her Horse "Winston"* (Ontario: Dairy Producers of Ontario, 1952). There are also many articles on the equestrian statue in the Ross Butler Scrapbooks. The statue was done in honor of the coronation of the new queen.





Fig. 13. Postcard of Alice Cooksley's butter flowers, Panama-Pacific International Exposition, San Francisco, 1915. Sponsored by California Central Creameries. (Author's collection.)

portrait sculpted in butter. The portrait was modeled while sculptor and sitter, bundled up in down jackets, worked in a refrigerated, revolving glass case in the dairy building. As the block of butter was carved away, an assistant handed out samples spread on crackers to the crowd. They could have their art and eat it too.<sup>43</sup>

In Iowa, another woman amateur continued the butter cow tradition. Norma "Duffy" Lyons has supplied butter sculpture for the Iowa State Fair since 1957. Lyons, a dairy farmer's wife, hoped to be a veterinarian, but that was unheard of for women in the 1940s, when she attended Iowa State University. So she majored in animal science and took several art classes, but she never intended to be a sculptor. She married the man she fell in love with and became a farmer's wife, using her education to help run the family business. Her husband was active in the state dairy association and she remembers seeing some of J. E. Wallace's butter cows at the fair, but he had died in 1956 and she was not impressed with the sculptor who replaced him.

<sup>43</sup> "Eleven Princess Kay Candidates Will Be Sculptured in Butter," *Redwood Gazette*, September 17, 1965; "Princess Kay Being Sculpted," *St. Paul Dispatch*, August 10, 1965; Marling, *Blue Ribbon*, 8, 12, 136–37; *Minn. State Fair Scrapbooks* (microfilm, vols. 115, 117, 119, 126, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul). The Princess Kay contest began in 1954, but the first butter-sculpture portraits were made in 1965.

While visiting the state headquarters she told the president that she could do better and he said, "Okay, you do the one for next year." She helped the already-hired sculptor for the first couple of years and took over on her own in 1960. She has made the annual butter cows ever since.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to the cows, Lyons has also done butter celebrity portraits, including those of Elvis Presley, Garth Brooks, and Tiger Woods. She did a Last Supper in 1999 that drew the attention of the national media there to cover the campaigning presidential candidates. Over the years, Lyons has demonstrated her butter art on national television shows such as *The Tonight Show*, *Today*, and *Good Morning America*.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Green, *The Butter Cow Lady*, 34–35. The sculptor who replaced Wallace was Frank Dutt (1910–2001), a commercial artist and graduate of the Chicago Art Institute. He did the Iowa butter cow from 1957 to 1959. He also created lard sculptures for the National Live Stock and Meat Board. See Michael Corey, "Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about the State Fair Butter Cow," <http://www.desmoinesregister.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/99999999/NEWS08/41020001>.

<sup>45</sup> Corey, "Everything You Ever Wanted to Know"; also, Solomon Banda, "Sculptor Creates Legacy in Butter," *South Coast Today*, September 5, 1999 (<http://www.southcoasttoday.com/daily/09-99/09-05-99/e0811205.htm>). A Google search for Norma Duffy Lyon turns up numerous references to her butter art. Other sculptors who continue the butter art tradition today include Sharon BuMann and Jim Victor. They supply butter sculpture for fairs all over the country. Both are professionally trained and also work in more conventional materials. Both have Web sites.

## Butter Sculpture and Advertising Cards

A number of factors contributed to the popularity of butter sculpture in the early twentieth century. Many of the state fairs in this period, especially in the Midwest, became permanent, with dedicated fairgrounds and year-round exhibition buildings. As refrigeration techniques improved in the 1910s, they added special dairy buildings.<sup>46</sup> The *Des Moines Register and Leader* reported in 1910 that visitors to the fair that year seemed almost as interested in the frost-covered ammonia pipe cooling the dairy case as in the butter cow that John K. Daniels had modeled.<sup>47</sup> The butter cow was admired, however, and the following year the crowds came back again. This time they could also take home a souvenir card that featured a picture of the butter sculpture along with advertising for the sponsor (see fig. 7). An identifying line below the image read: "Exhibit in State Fair Refrigerator made of Pure Meadow Gold Butter," and along the side: "Beatrice Creamery Co. Des Moines, Ia. / Cash Buyers of Cream / Manufacturers of Beatrice Cream Separators."

Such advertising cards would become an important means for extending the impact of the ephemeral butter sculpture. The display might last only as long as the fair, but the wonder the sculpture evoked and the name of the sponsoring company could be remembered, even by those not in attendance: "Send your friends a souvenir of the National Dairy Show with our compliments," proclaimed the Sugar Creek Creamery on the back of a 1929 card. Martin Burkhardt Jr. did just that when he wrote to his father in Plymouth, Wisconsin, "Well folks, We're here at the Dairy Show. Some cow this is, I must say!" referring to the J. E. Wallace butter cow reproduced on the other side. Along with the cow, a placard read: "Lady Crescent's Ideal. World's Record 4 year old Guernsey Cow owned by the Sugar Creek Creamery Co."<sup>48</sup> Clearly this was a productive cow, and the creamery exercised its boasting rights not only with the sculpture, but even more so with the card.

<sup>46</sup> Cathy J. Ambler, "The Look of the Fair: Kansas County Fairscapes, 1854-1994" (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 1996). One of her major points is the development of permanent buildings in the early twentieth century. The *Creamery Journal* also has numerous references to new dairy buildings and new refrigerated cases in the period.

<sup>47</sup> *Des Moines Register and Leader*, August 27, 1910, cited in "Everything You Ever Could Want to Know about the State Fair Butter Cow," <http://www.desmoinesregister.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/99999999/NEWS08/41020001>.

<sup>48</sup> Advertising card in the author's collection.

Hundreds of these cards were produced. In fact, the reason we know about the butter sculpture is, in part, because of them. Some were postcards with a space to write a message; others were advertising cards, the back covered with ad copy. The photograph of the butter sculpture provided the hook to capture attention, and the back served to identify the sponsor who provided the butter. *The Dairy Maid* (figs. 14 and 15) is typical: a young woman dressed in a Dutch costume is making butter in an old-fashioned wooden churn. On the back is "Hazelwood Company's Prize / Winning Ornamental / Butter Display / 'The Dairy Maid' / Spokane Interstate Fair / 1916 / 360 Pounds Butter Used in Making This Figure / Artist Howard Fisher." The essentials are all there: name of the company, place and date of the display, the amount of butter used, and the name of the artist. Often, however, the sculptor's name was omitted. The sponsoring creamery and statements about their products were obviously more important. For many of the cards representing J. E. Wallace's work, for example, we know he did the sculpture only because he placed his name on the title board at the bottom of the display and it was thus captured in the photograph. And so along with *Old Hickory at the Fair* (see fig. 10) there is "J. E. Wallace, Sculptor," all of the lettering being modeled in butter.

Industry representatives handed out the cards at the fairs and later to their customers. Today the cards bear witness to how widespread the butter sculpture displays were.<sup>49</sup> One reason for the cards and the intensity of the advertising was that the companies were in fierce competition—not only with each other, but also, more importantly, with their chief rival, that fake butter called oleo.

## Butter versus Oleo: Butter Sculpture in an Industry War

Oleomargarine had been invented in France in 1869 and was patented in the United States in 1873. By 1886 thirty-seven plants were making it in this country and it was gaining wide acceptance as a cheap butter substitute, much to the alarm of the dairy states. A writer for the *Topeka Daily Capitol* noted in 1894 that Kansans wanted "Honest Butter," not the stuff produced by the "insidious enemy," oleomargarine, which was "invading the

<sup>49</sup> A regular search on E-bay over the last five years has turned up over fifty examples of these advertising cards. They include regional, national, and international dairy shows as well as state fairs.



Fig. 14. Front of postcard of Howard Fisher's *The Dairy Maid*, for the Spokane Interstate Fair, 1916. Sponsored by Hazelwood Co. (Author's collection.)

market."<sup>50</sup> Dairy men lobbied for protective legislation, succeeding first with a federal law passed in 1886 that restricted labeling and packaging, and then with the Grout Bill in 1902 that offered further restrictions, including a tax on oleo that was colored yellow. By 1910 oleomargarine manufacturers were avoiding the tax by selling yellow dye packets with the naturally white oleo so the consumer could color it at home. It was not until 1950 that they finally succeeded in having the tax repealed.<sup>51</sup>

It is hard for the modern reader to grasp how intense the fight between the dairy and oleomargarine industries was in the early part of the twentieth century. The right of government to control food quality, something we take for granted as a task of the Food and Drug Administration, was only established in 1906. It was one of the many reforms of the Progressive Era, and Theodore Roosevelt was a hero to the dairy industry as a result. That may be one reason why there are so many portraits of him in butter. In debates that led to the various pieces of legislation then and later, the dairy industry presented tales of oleomargarine's unsanitary

<sup>50</sup> "Honest Butter," *Topeka Daily Capitol*, September 13, 1894; clipping in album, "Dairying" (Kansas Historical Society, Topeka).

<sup>51</sup> Gerry Strey, "The Oleo Wars: Wisconsin's Fight over the Demon Spread," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 85, no. 1 (Autumn 2001): 3-15; "How the Oleomargarine Bill Was Passed," *Creamery Journal* 19 (September 1, 1908): 18; H. R. Wright, "Oleomargarine—its Origin, Methods of Manufacture, and Its Fraud," *Creamery Journal* 21-22, five-part series (November 15 and December 15, 1910; January 15, 1911).

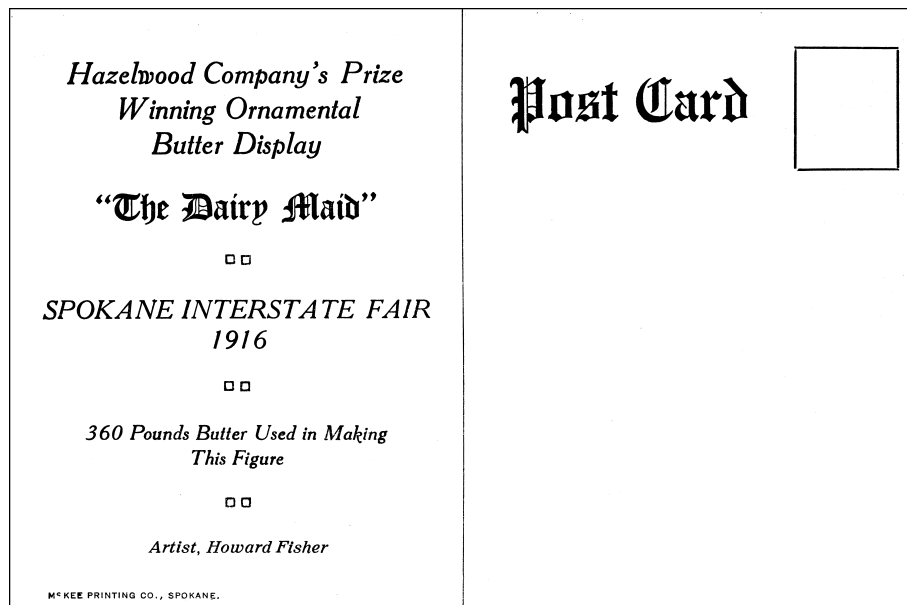


Fig. 15. Back of postcard of Howard Fisher's *The Dairy Maid*, for the Spokane Interstate Fair, 1916. Sponsored by Hazelwood Co. (Author's collection.)



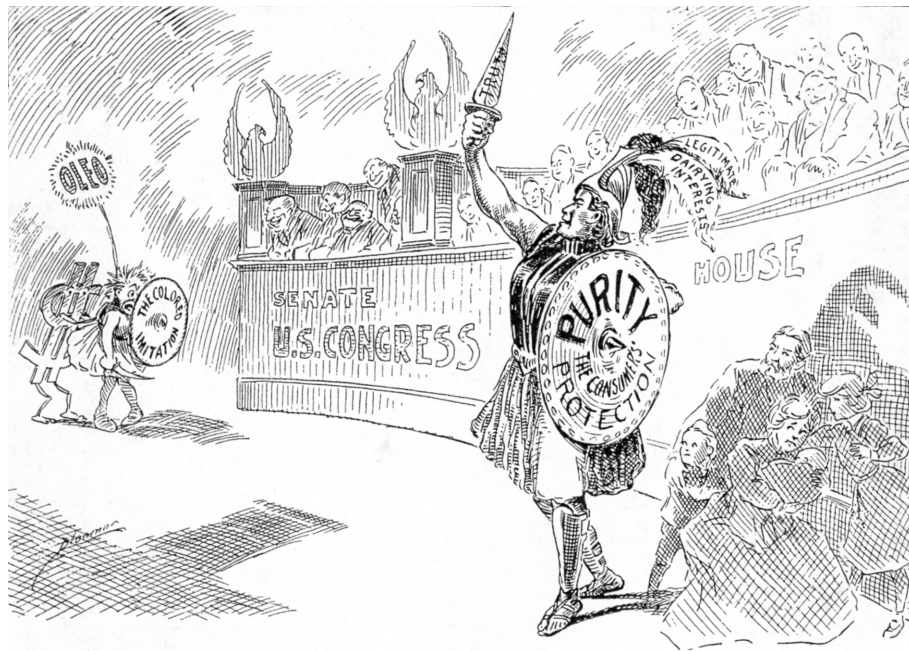


Fig. 16. Cartoon depicting the dairy interests as a gladiator protecting consumers with a shield of “purity” against the forces of oleo. *Creamery Journal*, vol. 19 (January 15, 1909): 15. (Author’s collection.)

production processes and its unsafe, unhealthy product.<sup>52</sup> A 1909 cartoon from the *Creamery Journal* indicates the tone of the ongoing campaign: a gladiator representing the dairy interests carries a shield of “Consumer’s Protection Purity” to defend a family huddled in his shadow, while he confronts a cowering oleo figure backed by a dollar sign (fig. 16). In the face of this intense competition, it may be easier to understand the appeal of the sculpted butter cows. They offered proof of the glory and abundance of real butter made from real cows on real farms, not the fake white stuff manufactured by chemists.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Strey, “The Oleo Wars,” 5.

<sup>53</sup> During World War II and later the lard and oleomargarine industries also used sculpture for promotion purposes. For example, a 1942 lard sculpture of a chorus of pigs singing their own praises was displayed that year at the International Livestock Show in Chicago. Frederick Simpich, “Farmers Keep Them Eating,” *National Geographic Magazine* (April 1943), 452. In the mid-1950s, Frank Dutt, the Iowa butter cow sculptor, also did lard sculptures of pigs and politicians for the livestock and meat organizations exhibiting at the fair. See Michael Corey, “Everything You Ever Wanted to Know,” <http://www.desmoinesregister.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/99999999/NEWS08/41020001>. As for oleomargarine, see Jean and George Hill, *Margarine Modelling* (Melbourne: Hospitality Press, 1988), which illustrates how to make sculpture from oleomargarine for banquet features. The authors make it clear that one needs industrial cooking margarine with its higher fat content to do the work. The sort of margarine available in the local grocery store would not do. Lard and oleomargarine sculpture was a product of the mid- to late twentieth century and does not have the

#### The Iconography and Meaning of Butter Sculpture

One way to explore the meaning of butter sculpture is to consider its imagery. While subjects range from cows to dairymaids to politicians and state houses, there is a consistent theme of the cow. The very first butter sculpture John K. Daniels created for the Minnesota fair was a cow. His best-known work was a cow with a little boy and a calf (see fig. 7). “Visitors at the [Ohio] fair always ask where they go to see the butter cow,” wrote W. L. Slatter in 1957. He also noted that J. E. Wallace had been making one for the fair every year since 1914.<sup>54</sup> The idea of a butter cow is, of course, a conceit. To make the cow from the product for which it produces the raw material is a clever reversal that brings irony and amusement to the viewer’s contemplation of the sculpture. In that light, it is not far from the conceits that underlay the meaning of Renaissance and Baroque traditions of banquet art. To make nature out of food is more than imitation. It is butter

same long history that butter does. Duffy Lyon, the Iowa butter sculptor, claims only real butter can make a successful sculpture and complained bitterly about an exhibit where they gave her margarine to work with. She says it is too sticky to work well. Lyon has done some lard sculptures but says the lard is much heavier than butter, so the armature has to be stronger (Green, *The Butter Cow Lady*, 44–46).

<sup>54</sup> W. L. Slatter to Ross Butler, March 22, 1957, Ross Butler Museum archives, Woodstock, ON.

imitating not only life, but also art as it masquerades as clay, bronze, or marble.<sup>55</sup>

Moreover, the allusions that such butter cows evoke include a whole range of romantic assumptions about the cow, the farm, freshness, and innocence. This was an important advertising ploy in an era when the reality was a cow scientifically bred to produce the optimal amount of butterfat; when it was milked with a machine and other machines separated the fat from the milk; when university-educated men in white lab coats and caps used tests to control quality; when large central creameries used sanitized machines to make the butter, block it, and wrap it for sale; and when national distribution systems with refrigerated trucks dispersed the butter to large chain grocery stores. The romantic, nostalgic ideal of a cow with a barefoot little boy trying to get a calf to nurse, or a pretty young dairymaid sitting on her stool squirting a stream of fresh milk to a kitten, or one dressed in antique Dutch costume working away at an old-fashioned wooden churn—all this provided a comforting visual rhetoric implying that this product was naturally and wholesomely produced. The machines and science were forgotten in the celebration of ideal myths of simple farmers and hard-working dairymaids.

Of course, not all the imagery dealt with nostalgia. Some if it, such as the Kansas display at the 1904 St. Louis Louisiana Purchase Exposition, asserted a very up-to-date view of the modern science of butter making with its model of the new state agricultural college and its lady in modern dress using a cream separator. But that was unusual. The butter cows, milkmaids, and farm boys dominated the iconography.

One feature that consistently competed with the butter cow, however, was the butter portrait. John K. Daniels regularly did the sitting governor for the Minnesota state fairs. He modeled the secretary of agriculture and the Chicago mayor for the 1906 dairy show. William Jennings Bryan appeared

in a butter bust at the Nebraska State Fair in 1905.<sup>56</sup> Teddy Roosevelt was depicted in butter in two different statues at St. Louis in 1904, and he appeared again in Minnesota in 1910. These were popular politicians, readily recognized by the fairgoers, and many of them played an important role in making decisions that affected the dairy industry. The flattery of being depicted in butter was another means by which the butter producers could curry favor with important leaders. The ongoing controversies with the oleomargarine industry made it all the more important that state and national leaders be on their side.

Aside from the faces of famous politicians, the dairy industry also appropriated culturally elite symbols as the subjects of butter sculpture. The Minnesota State House is a good example. When John K. Daniels depicted Cass Gilbert's famous building in butter, he invited his audience to make a transfer of associations from one context to another. The classical building with its dome, pediments, and columns represented not only the latest in beaux-art architectural ideals, it represented the pride of the state. To associate that classical ideal with butter was to reinforce the point that Minnesota dairy farms had helped to make such architectural splendor possible.<sup>57</sup> When Missouri presented the classical goddess Ceres in their 1904 display, the associations were even more obvious. Ceres was the goddess of nature. To her belonged the bounty of the earth. When she stood in the refrigerated case next to her cows and before the state seal, she spoke an allegorical language that fairgoers could understand. Missouri was blessed with abundance.

The idea of abundance underlies all of these images. The novelty of seeing something usually associated with small pats on pancakes presented in such gargantuan quantities as life-size sculpture was part of its appeal. Only a land with an abundant supply of butter could afford to do such a thing—a fact not missed by those Britons who complained about the butter statue of Queen Elizabeth in 1952. But even then, there was a sort of boasting by the Canadian dairy producers who sponsored it. They were not short of butter. In fact, they had so much they could send their surpluses

<sup>55</sup> Recent writing about food as art often emphasizes the psychological aspects of the idea of devouring (if only in the imagination) people, animals, and objects modeled in foodstuff. See Allen S. Weiss, "Edible Architecture, Cannibal Architecture," in *Eating Culture*, ed. Ron Scrapp and Brian Seitz (Albany, NY: SUNY University Press, 1993), 161–68; Jamie Horwitz and Paulette Singley, eds., *Eating Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004). Many of the essays in this volume explore deconstructivist ideas about food images. Also see Roland Barthes, "Cuisine Ornamental," in *Mythologies* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957), 144–46, and Salvador Dalí, "On The Terrifying and Edible Beauty of Art Nouveau Architecture," *Minotaure* 3–4 (1933): 68–76.

<sup>56</sup> *Creamery Journal* 17 (October 1, 1905): 29 (description), 24 (photograph).

<sup>57</sup> Burton Benedict, *The Anthropology of World's Fairs: San Francisco's Panama Pacific International Exposition of 1915* (Berkeley, CA: Scolar Press, for the Lowie Museum of Anthropology, 1983), 15–18.

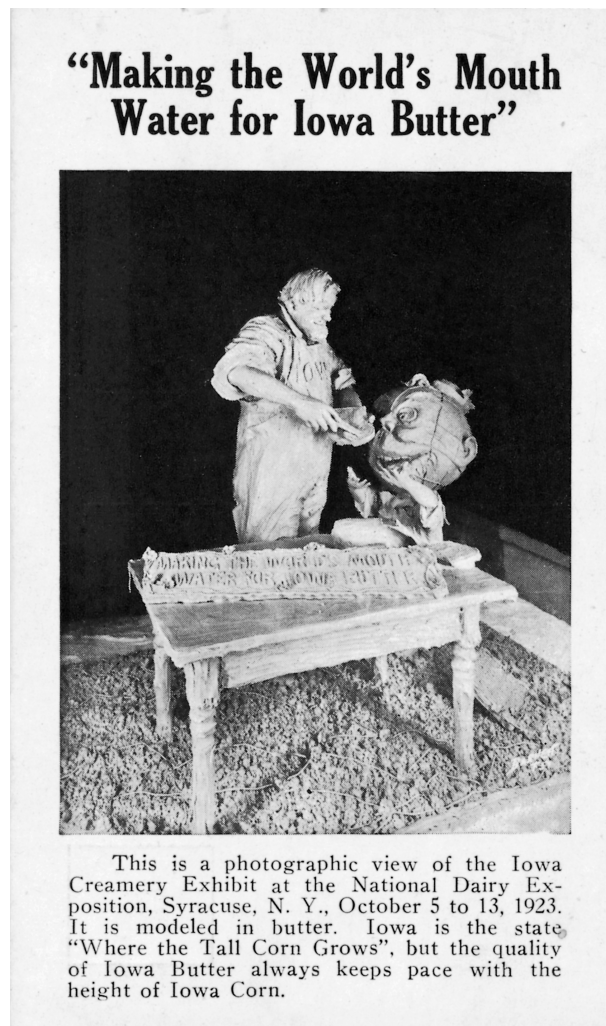


Fig. 17. Detail of postcard, *Making the World’s Mouth Water for Iowa Butter*, Iowa Creamery Exhibit, National Dairy Exposition, Syracuse, NY, 1923. (Author’s collection.)

abroad.<sup>58</sup> The fact that advertising almost always cited how many pounds of butter were used in the sculpture—over 1,000 pounds in the Minnesota State House, or example, or 1,500 in the Queen Elizabeth statue—reinforced this point. Look how much is being used, the ads proclaim; we have enough to feed everyone. That was a claim made quite literally in an Iowa display for the 1923 National Dairy Exposition in Syracuse, New York. The butter tableau depicted a hearty man in overalls feeding a slice of buttered bread to a

<sup>58</sup> Ross Butler proposed that the Canadian Dairy Producers send a million pounds of butter to Britain in honor of the coronation. There is no evidence that they actually did, but the proposal was widely publicized (newspaper clipping, Ross Butler Scrapbooks, Ross Butler Museum archives, Woodstock, ON).

cartoon-like globe (fig. 17).<sup>59</sup> We can, indeed, feed the world, the sculpture seemed to imply.

The fairs themselves were testimony to this theme of abundance. One writer described the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition as “a store house of Mother Earth, where she has brought her increase to gladden the eyes and hearts of men; here is spread out in choice variety and endless abundance a feast of the good things of material life.”<sup>60</sup>

The Industrial Revolution had made such “good things of material life” possible, and the spectacular displays of foodstuffs were another expression of its success. Butter sculpture was only one small part of this, of course. As I have noted more fully elsewhere, crop-art displays at the fairs also featured sculpture and architecture made of corn, grains, seeds, and grasses.<sup>61</sup> A temple in corn stood next to crop effigies of cows and eagles at the St. Louis Exposition in 1904 (fig. 18), for example. The previously mentioned knight of prunes and the Liberty Bell of oranges at the Chicago fair or the replica of Fort Snelling in apples at the Buffalo Pan-American Exposition were all expressions of this attitude. Each state proclaimed its abundance with its produce.

Of course, despite these public images, the turn-of-the-century agricultural displays were also an attempt to counter a more troubling side to contemporary life. Famine, drought, panic, and economic depression were not far from the memory or experience of the people who saw the displays.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, many of the fairs, the 1893 Chicago exposition included, opened in a time of financial panic. In uncertain times, crop-art exhibits seemed to promise confidence and security. Look at all this, they seemed to say; surely there is no need to panic. Your investments are safe and so is the American dream. That dream was the promise of the country as the New Eden, a place where there was plenty for all. When food was piled high or sculpted into lifelike images, it was the visual symbol that the new world had fulfilled its promise.

<sup>59</sup> Advertising card in the author’s collection.

<sup>60</sup> Cameron, *The World’s Fair*, 304–5.

<sup>61</sup> Pamela H. Simpson, “Cereal Architecture: Late Nineteenth Century Corn Palaces,” in *Building Environments: Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, vol. 10, ed. Kenneth A. Briesch and Alison K. Hoagland (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 269–82, and “Turn-of-the-Century Midwestern Corn Festivals: Kiosks and Crop Art as American Icons,” *ARRIS* (the journal of the Southeast Society of Architectural Historians) 14 (2003): 1–15.

<sup>62</sup> Marling, “The Origins of Minnesota Butter Sculpture,” 223, articulates this idea, as do I in the articles cited above.



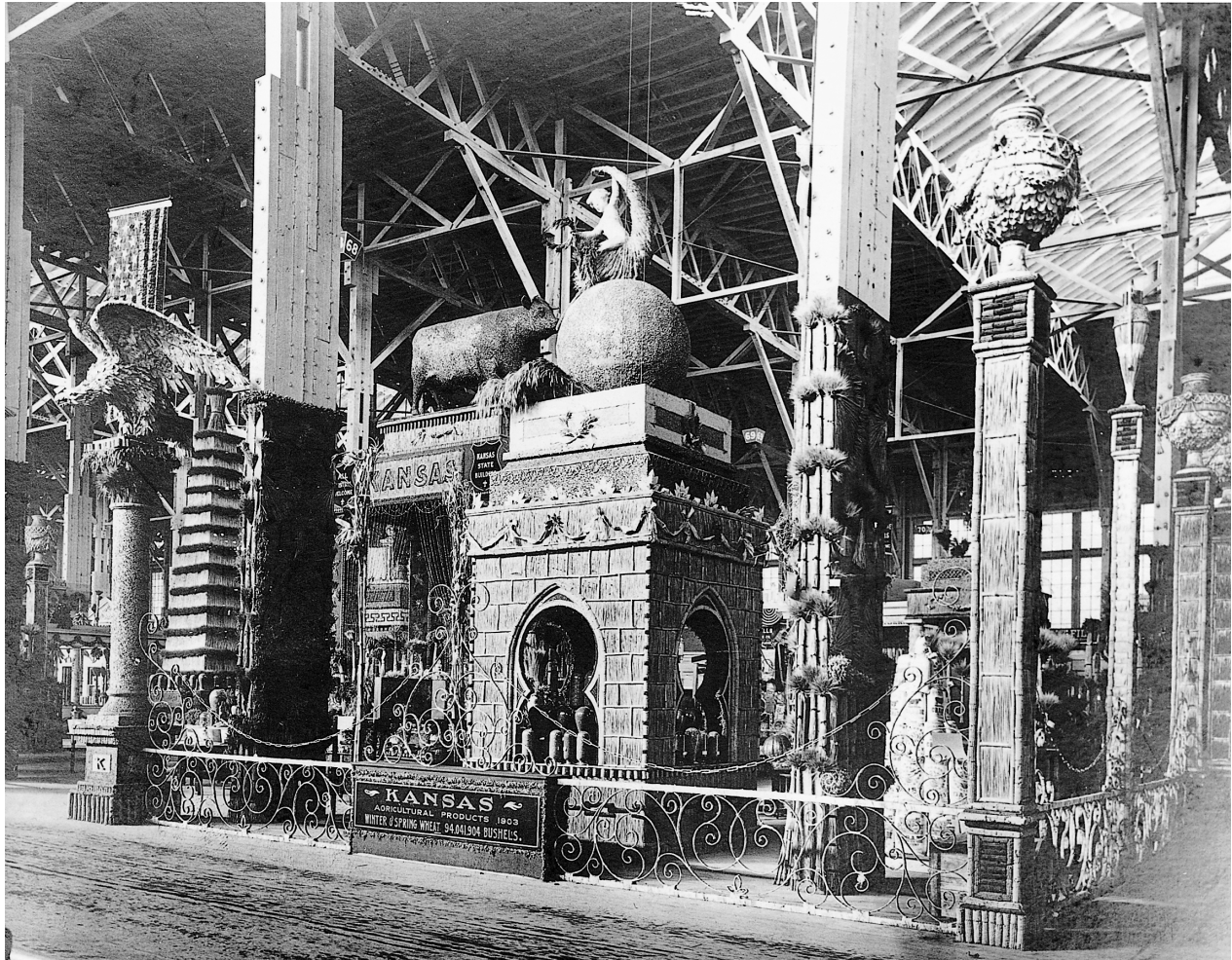


Fig. 18. Crop art in the Kansas Agricultural Exhibit, Louisiana Purchase Exposition, St. Louis, 1904. (Kansas State Historical Society.)

### Conclusion

What can be learned from this survey of butter art? Probably the first thing to note is that while butter sculpture has a long history, its heyday was in the period from 1900 to 1930. It started as an aristocratic art for banquets in the sixteenth century, but its modern appearance as a feature of the fairs began with Caroline Brooks's introduction of it at the centennial in 1876. Eventually, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, butter sculpture became an advertising medium for the dairy industry. Professional sculptors such as John K. Daniels, Lu Verharan Lavell, and J. E. Wallace, as well as amateurs with connections to the dairy industry such as Alice Cooksley, Ross Butler, and

Duffy Lyons, supplied the butter art. The style of this butter sculpture was consistently realistic, and, while some sculptors were more skilled than others, none of them attempted the modern modes of abstraction. That is not surprising. Butter sculpture was a popular art aimed at a popular audience. Although there might be the occasional appropriation of high cultural symbols, the art itself was meant to be understood by the masses. And clearly it was. The crowds asking where they could find the butter cow, or the groups gathering to see what the latest tableau would be at the state fairs, would have agreed with Queen Mary's assessment, "How amusing, how amusing." It pleased and delighted not only kings and queens, but also ordinary people everywhere.

