

The Painted Forest

The Painted Forest is a simple white frame building set on a hillside in the small community of Valton, Wisconsin, in the Upper Baraboo River country. Its treasure lies inside, where the walls and ceiling are covered with visionary and intriguing murals painted in the late 1890s by an itinerant self-taught German painter, Ernest Hüpeden.

The village of Valton, in the northwest corner of Sauk County, was settled before the Civil War. A mill was built there in 1857, and the village grew during the last half of the 19th century as businesses and churches were built. Later, Valton gradually declined in population, as did many other small Wisconsin communities.

Today Valton's fame rests in its being home to one of the oldest Quaker churches in Wisconsin and to the remarkable folk art museum, The Painted Forest.

Around 1890, men of the Valton area community organized a "camp" or local unit of the Modern Woodmen of America (MWA). They employed the itinerant painter Ernest Hüpeden to decorate the interior of their camp with murals and so the building originally known as "Wood Hall" came much later to be known as "The Painted Forest."

The MWA was not only a life insurance company that would assist widows and orphans, but also a fraternal organization intended by its founder to "provide wholesome social activities and character building."

These camps sponsored family picnics and other social activities, as well as monthly meetings, initiation rituals for new members, and local community gatherings. The vivid, imaginative scenes painted by Ernest Hüpeden recreate a remarkable vision of life, death, initiation rituals, and the aspirations of the Valton camp members.

Directions to Valton (Sauk County) from Edgewood College

Via US 12

From Edgewood College Dr., go left on Monroe St. to Nakoma Rd. Turn left at the stoplight at S. Midvale Blvd. Turn right onto the ramp at sign for "US 12 W/US 14 W" (the beltline). Go northwest continuing on US 12 for about 45 miles.

At WIS-33 just north of Baraboo, turn left and go west through Reedsburg to LaValle, about 20 miles. In LaValle, take WIS-58 and go southwest through Ironton for 5 miles to Co. Rd. G. Turn right on G and go about 6 miles to Co. Rd. EE. Turn left on EE and go one mile to Valton. The Painted Forest is a block north of Co. Rd. EE in Valton.

Via US 14 and Co. Rd. G, or US 14 and WIS-23

From Edgewood College, go to the beltline "US 12 W/US 14 W" and at Middleton, exit to US 14. Take US 14 west to Spring Green, and exit to Co. Rd. G – just north of Spring Green (take junction of WIS-23 with US 14). Continue on G to Co. Rd. EE. Turn left on EE and go one mile to Valton.

OR, from US 14 just north of Spring Green, take WIS-23 north to Reedsburg. In Reedsburg, turn left onto WIS-33 to LaValle. Then go south on 58, to County Rd. G. Go about 6 miles to Co. Rd. EE. Turn left on EE and go one mile to Valton. The Painted Forest is a block north of Co. Rd. EE in Valton.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT
Robert Tarrell, Chair of Art Department



EDGEWOOD COLLEGE

1000 Edgewood College Drive
Madison, WI 53711
www.edgewood.edu
608-663-4861



Detail from mural at the Painted Forest (1897-99)

The Painted Forest

The Arts Learning Center

Valton, WI



The Kohler Foundation

After its use as a MWA camp, the Painted Forest building was used for public gatherings until it gradually fell into disuse. In the early 1980s, the Kohler Foundation, having purchased the site, restored the building and its remarkable murals. The Foundation entrusted the site to Sauk County which cared for it for many years. Tours were provided by the Historical Society of the Upper Baraboo Valley. In 2004, the Foundation gave The Painted Forest to Edgewood College to foster its use for educational and historic purposes and to preserve this unique work of art.

The Kohler Foundation supports education and art, as well as Wisconsin culture and heritage, through scholarships, grants, distinguished guest series, Waelderhaus, and art preservation. Since the late 1970s, the preservation of folk architecture, art environments, and collections by self-taught artists has been a major focus. Collections or sites are acquired by or gifted to a county, municipality, museum, or educational institution. The Foundation works with the recipient to ensure the preservation and educational benefits of the site or collection for the future.

The Kohler Foundation's art preservation efforts are at the forefront of the self-taught and outsider-art movements, and the Foundation has received many awards for its role in preservation and arts education.



Detail from mural at the Painted Forest (1897-99)

Who was Ernest Hüpeden?

The itinerant painter of the unique murals at The Painted Forest came to New York from Germany in 1878, after imprisonment on a false accusation of embezzlement. During his prison years, Hüpeden taught himself to paint.

About 20 years after arriving in New York, he reached Wisconsin, supporting himself by painting barns or whatever came to hand along the way. In Valton he spent two years (1897-99) painting the entire interior

of the MWA camp building—stage curtain, walls, and ceiling—in exchange for room and board.

Little is known about this self-taught artist, and few of his works have survived. Many small paintings were ephemeral: portraits or landscapes painted on plates and bottles. He was found dead in a snow bank in Hillsboro, Wisconsin, about a dozen years after he had completed his masterpiece: The Painted Forest.

Edgewood College's Role

In October 2004, the Kohler Foundation gave the Painted Forest site to Edgewood College of Madison, Wisconsin.

The College has pledged to continue the site's role in educating students, artists, researchers, and other visitors and to preserve this unique Wisconsin "outsider" art treasure for the future.

Edgewood College has sponsored exhibits of outsider artists like Mona Webb and Dr. Evermor. Recently the College acquired sculptures by Dr. Charles Smith—gifts from the Kohler Foundation. These self-taught or outsider artists provide evidence of the power of the creative human spirit transforming often-humble materials into works of art.

The arts have long played an important role at Edgewood College, and experience in the arts is a requirement for each undergraduate.

A Catholic college founded by the Sisters of the Dominican Sisters in 1927, Edgewood offers graduate and undergraduate degrees in the arts, sciences, humanities, and professional programs.

The College's concern with partnership in community and respect for the natural environment promise that its presence in Valton and the Upper Baraboo River country will be that of a good neighbor for years to come.



Edgewood College students and staff visit The Painted Forest.