

M.T. Liggett: An Unlikely Artist

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M.T. Liggett. Image courtesy of The Wichita Eagle.

M.T. Liggett, animated and at times brash, collected a bevy of life experiences in his 86 years, many of which appear in the self-described “totems” he made beginning in the 1980s. One could say M.T. Liggett’s life is one large circle.

Myron Thomas Liggett was born on December 28th, 1930, with his twin brother Byron Thomas. Liggett’s life began where it later ended, in Mullinville, KS, 10 miles west of Greensburg, KS. Born into the Great Depression and Dust Bowl, Liggett’s early years were marked by hardship which had a lasting influence on the artist’s life and work. Long before he welded pieces of scrap metal together to create mythological characters and high-profile figures and individuals from his past, Liggett’s artistic ventures were crushed. Speaking with the photo essayist Ian Crane, Liggett shared that one of his grammar school teachers mocked him because he drew a cow with a purple crayon, the only one he had. “She’d say, ‘See what Myron T. did.’ I said the hell with it, so I quit art for years.”

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With any prospect of making art sidelined, Liggett left Mullinville for the Navy at age 17 where he served for three years. He later joined the Air Force in 1957, where he stayed for 16 years. Liggett's time in the military introduced him to cultures and experiences that were out of reach otherwise. Many stories from that period would later be depicted in his totems, with a hearty, sometimes humorous, irreverence.

Retiring from the Air Force as a Master Sergeant in 1973 ushered in a new phase in Liggett's life. The veteran went on to get a bachelor's degree from Fort Hays State and studied law at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Liggett's schooling likely played some role in his penchant for sharing his opinions. After a career in custom-cutting wheat and selling machine tools, Liggett returned to Mullinville in 1987. With decades of nomadic life behind him, Liggett spent the rest of his life in his hometown and finally returned to artmaking.

The title of Joshua Dubois' 2022 film, *It Started with a Horse*, captures Liggett's impetus for making art again. When Liggett returned to Mullinville in 1987, he held over 70 acres of pastureland with miles of frontage on US Highway 400 and Kansas Highway 54. A single, malicious act in 1989 changed the trajectory of his life.

One morning, Liggett found his horse killed in an apparent poisoning. With little knowledge of how the senseless act was done, he placed his first work, which he dubbed a gargoyle, on his fence line.

Liggett kept creating sculptures, totems, and whirlygigs "...out of scrap metal, reused farm implements and tools, and found objects... He used welding tools like a plasma torch cutter and an arc welder, and he also created his own tools such as hammers, axes, tables, and fans," says Johanna Diercks, M.A. (University of Missouri-Kansas City), associate appraiser for Madison Group Fine Art. Liggett roused locals with sculptures about women in his past, politicians and institutions, but he also made sculptures on nonpolitical subjects like music and mythology. *Perseus*, which will be revealed at Volland on September 29th, is an amalgam of farming implements and scrap metal. Donned with a shield and sword, *Perseus* highlights the artist's broad intellectual interests.

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M.T. Liggett, *Perseus*. Gift of the Kohler Foundation.

Between 1989 and his death in 2017, Liggett created some 600 sculptures and 500+ smaller metal cutouts and freestanding works of art. They lined his property, ranging from eight to nine feet tall to towering 20-foot totems. In 2001, The Wichita Eagle reported the stretch of highway

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drew over 100 stopped vehicles a day, prompting the Kansas Department of Transportation to install “Emergency Parking Only” signs in the area. Diercks adds: “His reputation as a local curmudgeon and his grassroots approach to artmaking eventually caught the eye of the Kansas State tourism board, which designated Liggett’s property as an important Kansas art site. After his death, the Liggett property and collection of totems and whirligigs was conserved with funding from the Kohler Foundation, and the Liggett estate and property is now a protected Art Environment.” Kohler donated the site to the 5.4.7 Art Center in Greensburg, KS, in August 2022.

Prolific well into his eighties, Liggett is a figure to be celebrated for his determination. Remaining true to his voice, regardless of the attention it garnered, negative or positive, M.T. Liggett, the unlikely artist, is a reminder that we all have something to contribute to the conversation. From Mullinville and back, and through the arc of his artistic practice, his circular lifepath displays the rich human experience.

M.T. Liggett: Art and Legacy

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M.T. Liggett in his studio. Courtesy of M.T. Liggett Art Environment.

“I can’t make you mad. Only you can make you mad.”

– M.T. Liggett

There’s one aspect everyone can appreciate about M.T. Liggett: his candor. The boisterous, eccentric Mullinville, KS resident was not one to keep his opinions under wraps. To this day some people find themselves uneasy about Liggett’s sculptures. Liggett maintained he only made work about people he liked, and his friends assert that while Liggett was “a poker,” he only made work about people “he knew could take it.”

In Volland’s last newsletter, we learned about M.T. Liggett’s life. In his youth, M.T. Liggett experienced poverty and was dissuaded from art-making, but he also traveled the world while he

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served in the military and applied himself in school on subjects like politics and law. Liggett shared his life experiences, interests, and political opinions unabashedly along his property line on US Highway 400 and Kansas Highway 54 beginning in 1989 until his death in 2017.

Liggett's work often bristles at the Midwest's unwritten code of politeness. Most Kansans can recall a time hearing the rule "If you can't say something nice about someone or something don't say anything at all." Liggett rebuffed this attitude, telling *The New York Times* in 1997, "A man is never remembered for words he did not say."



Photo by Anthony Esau. Courtesy of Upland Exhibits.

Art has no shortage of figures where you must "separate the art from the artist." Not for Liggett. His art was an extension of his life and views. Much like we see today on social media or in opinion columns, Liggett engaged in public discourse through his art, often with a touch of hyperbole. As an artist, Liggett sought to create discomfort through his work. Some Mullinville

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residents chafed at Liggett's totems while others saw them for what they are: pieces meant to launch and contribute to the conversation – with biting commentary, wit, and sometimes humor.

Liggett used his own life as source material too. Well documented in *It Started with a Horse*, Liggett did not hide the adventures he had with women earlier in his life. Instead, he remembered these moments with totems, and it's fair to say some of the women in question would not have been pleased with his representation. Liggett lays bare his lifeways in these pieces, unafraid of how they were received. In that way, Liggett was a completely authentic figure, opening himself up to the same criticism he invited for high-profile figures.



M.T. Liggett Art Environment. Photo by Roxie Yonkey of [RoxieontheRoad.com](https://roxieontheroad.com).

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Across miles of highway frontage and hundreds of brightly colored works, M.T. Liggett created an environment of scrutiny and discussion not only of the works, but of the artist himself. Holding strong opinions was important to Liggett, who said “you’re nothing” without them. While some of Liggett’s imagery is offensive, it’s obvious that was the artist’s intent, needling the viewer, stirring the pot. By sharing his opinions so freely and strongly, he in turn deepens viewer’s own positions.

M.T. Liggett: A Kansas Artist

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M.T. Liggett. Courtesy of Erika Nelson.

No matter their category, M.T. Liggett and others like him have a rightful place in the artworld.

Many terms have been floated for artists of Liggett's ilk. Artists and art historians like to group art together to make a typology, mark movements, and suggest lines of influence. However well intentioned, the practice has long rubbed artists the wrong way. Self-taught art, Outsider Art, folk art, and Art Brut are just a few terms used for artists like M.T. Liggett. Some of these descriptors are dated and are lamented among artists and scholars due to their othering approach. More sympathetic categorization names might be Grassroots Art or Visionary Art. It's hard to imagine M.T. Liggett being excited about any classification.

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No matter their category, M.T. Liggett and others like him have a rightful place in the artworld. Just this year, Elizabeth “Grandma” Layton was shown at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art at Johnson County Community College in an exhibit titled Elizabeth Layton: Drawing as Discourse. Much like Liggett, Layton arrived at her art practice late in life - in her case at the age of sixty-eight. Born in 1909 in Wellsville, KS, a town of about 2000 in Franklin County, Layton and her work extended far beyond the plains. Through her drawings - which started with a blind contour sketch, a technique where the artist observes a scene and composes a work without looking at the paper – Layton overcame a 30-year bout with depression. Also paralleling Liggett, Layton touched on contemporary issues and self-reflection, sharing her views on women’s rights, the environment and aging. As reported in KC Studio, Layton’s drawings are collected by “the Whitney Museum of American Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the American Folk Art Museum in New York City, the Art Institute of Chicago, The Saint Louis Art Museum, The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The Phoenix Art Museum, the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., and numerous others.”

Another visionary Kansas artist of note is S.P Dinsmoor. Lucas, KS is home to the artist’s Garden of Eden, an all-encompassing art environment with over 200 concrete works. After Dinsmoor returned from the Civil War to his home in Ohio he joined the local Masonic Lodge to better understand different life experiences. New thinking led Dinsmoor to live his own self-determined life, working as a teacher in Illinois for five years then moving to Kansas to farm in 1888. Like Liggett and Layton, Dinsmoor took up art later in life, making his first concrete structure in 1905. Dinsmoor also waded into political issues, showing his support for laborers in his work. Showing how personal his work was to him, Dinsmoor built his own mausoleum at the Garden of Eden to entomb himself and his wife for eternity. A plate glass allows visitors to the Garden of Eden to look at the artist’s decaying body.

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S.P. Dinsmoor's *Garden of Eden* art environment in Lucas, KS. Courtesy of the [Garden of Eden](#) and [Kohler Foundation](#).

Strong self-motivation and free-thinking led Liggett, Layton, and Dinsmoor to their visionary art, freeing them from traditional art-making and the opinions of their peers. *Man/Bonehead*, one of eight sculptures to be revealed at Volland on September 29th, provides a glimpse at Liggett's thoughts on humanity. Standing nearly 8 feet tall on its stand and made from painted metal and farming implements, *Man/Bonehead* uses non-traditional materials to speak on mankind's impact on nature.

Like his predecessors S.P. Dinsmoor and Elizabeth "Grandma" Layton, M.T. Liggett continued the tradition of Kansas maverick artists. These artists charted their own path with freedom serving as their north star.

M.T. Liggett Through a Contemporary Lens

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M.T. Liggett. Courtesy of M.T. Liggett Art Environment

Seven years after M.T. Liggett, the fiercely independent artist from Mullinville, KS, died of renal failure in 2017, technology allows artists to be just as vocal as Liggett, and the country finds itself wrestling with many of the themes Liggett explored. Our current moment, characterized by many opportunities to share fervent displays of political opinions and discussions around personal freedoms, underscores how the artist was ahead of the social curve. As years go by, art's context shifts, suggesting new meanings. With this newsletter we aim to explore how M.T. Liggett's life and work responds to our place in 2024.

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Between 2009-10 the American Visionary Art Museum, located in Baltimore, Maryland, displayed six of Liggett's sculptures in an exhibit titled *Life, Liberty & the Pursuit of Happiness*. The exhibit's title, borrowed from the Declaration of Independence, parallels how Liggett lived his life and made his work. In the years following that exhibit and Liggett's death, the ability for lone creative voices to share their perspectives and opinions has only grown.

Before we entered the hyper-connected world we live in today, artistic merit was largely determined by periodicals and newspaper reviewers. The reputation of an artist was dependent on the whim of powerful figures steering the public's taste. Today, artists enjoy a more egalitarian system, with the ability to share their work widely through websites, independent publications and social media. Looking back, Liggett's public-facing display on US Highway 400 and Kansas Highway 54 was the most effective avenue to broadcast his work.

Artists freely express themselves in a similar way today through URLs and Instagram posts, inventing more ways to work outside artworld norms.



Photo by Anthony Esau. Courtesy of Upland Exhibits

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Not only did Liggett set an example for artists' publicizing their work, he also forecast shifting tides in American politics. Rightfully or not, Liggett's works about political figures, especially those with high profiles, are likely the ones that attract the most notoriety and serve as the source of his fame. Volland touched on Liggett's politically minded sculptures in the second installment of this newsletter series.

Political incorrectness was Liggett's style long before others adopted it. His opinions were sometimes abrasive, but never malicious. His intention was to invite discourse. Liggett, with his status as an independent artist of the people, was in many ways a forerunner for populist ideas that have lately found success across the political spectrum. Liggett also reminds us that images – the manner in which public servants and their critics choose to display themselves and their opponents - create political flashpoints. Despite his engagements with politics, Liggett worried about the trends he noticed. Six months before his death, he told RoadsideAmerica.com, "I'll tell you, if the politics of the day inspire you, you've got to be sick in the head."

More than a bellwether for decentralizing art and anticipating political changes, Liggett continues to serve as a reminder of American individualism today. As mentioned previously in this newsletter series, Liggett led a life that was completely of his own choosing. Straying from norms did not make Liggett meek; in fact, his idiosyncrasies only emboldened the artist.

Since 2017 debates around personal freedoms and expression have grown. We can only imagine how Liggett would respond to today's dialogue around pronouns, abortion, and policing. We can safely assume that everyone would walk away knowing where Liggett stood.

Reflecting on Liggett's life and work, it is clear to see the lasting power of his totems. Few artists have achieved the kind of polarizing appeal that his work provoked. In that way, along with his deft observations on American politics and his methods of publicizing his art, Liggett and his work remain relevant today.