

Wilbur Niewald (b. 1925) has travelled widely—living, teaching, and painting in Vermont, New York, Boston, Aspen, Santa Fe, and Arizona; Paris and Aix-en-Provence, France; Florence, Italy; and Mexico. In each place, he has sought to capture in watercolors and oil paint the spirit of the natural landscape and the human constructions within it. The watercolors on view here address these same themes. All depict familiar sites in and around Kansas City—places to which Niewald returns again and again, seeking to know them better. As with Monet and his *Waterlilies* or Cezanne and his *Mont Saint Victoire*, Niewald captures the spirit of familiar places and invites us to experience them anew.

Once a Civil War battle site, Loose Park is today a peaceful oasis in Kansas City's midtown. Its rose garden, pond, playground, tennis courts, and picnic areas are well used and much beloved. Niewald's watercolors of the park's giant aged pine trees evoke the spirit of Ottorino Respighi's symphonic poem for orchestra, *Pines of Rome*. Cast against the delicate hues and brushwork of sky and grass, the towering, voluminous trees are alive with energy. United as a singular mass or standing as individual sentinels, they are emblems of endurance.

Niewald brings us face to face with the elemental force of impenetrable stone in this body of work. Yet even here, centuries of weathering have broken a single mass into faceted surfaces, where windblown seeds have found refuge and taken root. Ever sensitive to the passage of time, Niewald documents the verdant greens of grass, trees, shrubby plants, and weeds, as well as barren rock. Tonal shifts record the seasonal cycles.

Two centuries ago, the Santa Fe Trail passed through what is now Kansas City's 176-acre Penn Valley Park. Today, the park is home to Cyrus Dallin's bronze sculpture, *The Scout*, Alexander Proctor's bronze sculpture, *Pioneer Mother*, and the National World War I Museum and Memorial. But these are not Niewald's subjects. Instead, his focus is on the park's elevated northern ridge, which offers a spectacular view of the lake below, a stretch of I-35 (at left), and downtown Kansas City. Niewald's watercolors capture both the city's pastoral setting and its dynamic urban core. The transition from cool, fluid greens and blues to deeper browns, grays, and reds further underscores this transition.

On September 15, 1806, the Expedition of Discovery, led by Merriwether Lewis and William Clark stopped at what is now Clark's Point in Kansas City's Case Park. Today, a bronze sculpture of Lewis, Clark, their Shoshone guide Sacagawea, her baby son Jean Baptiste Charbonneau (nicknamed Pompy), and Lewis' Newfoundland dog, Seaman, mark this auspicious site.

From this same elevated site, Niewald has captured one of the most iconic vistas in Kansas City: the dramatic curve that begins in the upper right where the Kaw River flows into the great Missouri River. The dynamism of that curve is echoed and underscored in the extraordinary composition of the painting: a sweeping S-curve comprised of highway, tree line, and street that guides our eyes from the distant horizon line to the lower frontal left, and just as easily returns us from left foreground to the distant upper right. Glimpses of red brick buildings locate us in Kansas City's West Bottoms.

Here, Niewald shifted his point of view further to the West, bringing the ruddy brick buildings of the Bottoms—including the Stockyards Building, which houses his studio, into prominence. At left, the bold geometry of the Twelfth Street Viaduct provides additional guidance for the viewer.

One feature unites all of the watercolors on view here: the subtle neutrality of the skies. Loosely brushed in pale tints of gray, blue, and rose, they float above the trees, rocks, and buildings, airy and free.

- Jan Schall, art historian