

Francis Colburn

Family Group, c.1939

Francis Colburn (1909-1984)

Oil on canvas

Born in Fairfax, Vermont, Francis Colburn spent his life recording the people and terrain of his home state in serious, often dark, paintings. After graduating from the University of Vermont in 1934, Colburn studied painting in New York at the Art Students League with Morris Kantor and Raphael Soyer. During his formative years the artist also worked for Vermont's Federal Art Project, a division of the national Works Progress Administration, and spent time studying painting with Stefan Hirsch at Bennington College. He became an artist-in-residence at his alma mater in 1942, where he remained until retiring in 1974, after founding the University's Art Department and serving for many years as its chairman.

Vermont hill farmers lived a hardscrabble life, struggling against poor agricultural conditions, including rocky, nutrient-poor soil and often harsh weather. The snow on the ground in the upper left and the dilapidated building in the center left of this painting make this clear, emphasized by the disjointed, almost collage-like, depiction of the architecture and the way the structure seems to be barely holding on to the hillside. Despite the gloomy outlook for the family, at the tail end of the Great Depression, Colburn has painted them with great dignity and compassion. The father's arm draped across his son's chest adds a degree of gentle, loving sentiment one might not normally associate with a rugged Vermont farmer.

Bennington Museum Collection, Museum purchase