When tillage begins, other arts follow. The farmers, therefore, are the founders of human civilization.

When American statesman Daniel Webster uttered these words in 1840, it’s unlikely that he had in mind a genre of art created with the fruits of the farmers’ tillage as a palette. But if Webster could join the hordes of visitors who return year after year to the Agriculture Building at the Minnesota State Fair for the annual crop art display, he would surely be as impressed as the rest of the crowd by what can be accomplished with seeds and glue. A portrait of Barbra Streisand rendered in ground white corn, grits, timothy, poppy seeds, safflower, and peas. The American bald eagle in hollyhock, alfalfa, red clover, bromegrass, watermelon, salsify, and cantaloupe seeds. Jesus Christ in wild rice, timothy, canola, grists, poppy, and salsify seeds. Perhaps Webster would wonder what this form of art indicates about the course of human civilization in Minnesota.

Displayed beside pyramids of prize ears of corn, onions, potatoes, and other prize-winning produce, crop art gives the impression of being a traditional hobby left over from a bygone era of homegrown self-sufficiency. In fact, seed mosaics were introduced to the fair only in 1965, and Minnesota remains the sole state fair in the nation with a competitive category for crop art. Orris Shulstadt, superintendent of the fair’s division of farm crops at the time, perhaps saw crop art as a way to draw popular attention back to a division that had once been among the fair’s primary reasons for being.

In the 1850s, before the territory of Minnesota had even become a state, the state fair (and periodic world fairs) had served as an opportunity to promote the bounty of the land to potential immigrants from the East Coast. Interestingly, the agricultural societies that sponsored the state fair were established not by farmers, but by bankers, merchants, and public figures with an interest in promoting the settlement of the region. Their efforts paid off. By the 1890s Minneapolis—with its railroad connections to the rich farmlands of western Minnesota, the Dakotas, and Montana, firepower for milling at the Falls of St. Anthony, and easy access to the waterways of the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River—was home to the largest grain market in the world.

By the early 1900s, fairtime had become a tussle of one-upsmanship for county booster clubs, railroads, nurseries, growers’ associations, and seed dealers, all striving for the most impressive displays of produce. In 1906, for example, visitors to the fair were torn between admiration for a towering replica of the new state capitol building made of white onions, produced by the Grower’s Association of St. Paul, and a display made by their rival Market Gardeners’ Association of Minneapolis—a model of the local landmark Minnehaha Falls made entirely of vegetables “in harmonizing colors.” (In neighboring South Dakota, a similar impulse produced the Mitchell Corn Palace, a massive structure whose exterior has been redecorated nearly every year since 1892 with patterns and murals formed from locally grown corns, grains, and grasses.) Over the years, however, as these commercial groups turned to other methods of advertising, and as access to frozen and processed foods became widely available, the fair’s division of farm crops became the province of the hobbyist. Displays of freakishly large or misshapen pumpkins and cucumbers were typically the most popular attractions.

The modern incarnation of crop art reportedly originated when two hobbyists from rural Minnesota, inspired by a mosaic mural they had seen in a downtown office building on a visit to Minneapolis, began reproducing their crewel patterns in agricultural materials. Despite contemporary crop art’s disjunction from a longstanding agricultural tradition, the rules for state fair competition clearly intend that contestants at least consider some of the practical aspects of farming. All seeds used must be those of plants able to grow in Minnesota, and the seeds of weeds are strictly forbidden. The first year of competition attracted a handful of participants, including an entry or two by Superintendent Shulstadt’s sister. The second year saw a tenfold increase in the number of entries, one of which was a depiction of a grouse by hairstylist Lilian Colton of Owatonna, Minnesota, who had happened upon the crop art display on her visit to the fair the year before.
Colton has dominated the crop art display every year since then. Now ninety years old, she retired from competition sixteen years ago to give other competitors a chance to win the ribbons. She still spends each of the twelve days of the fair every year demonstrating the craft in front of a wall covered with examples of her work. A touch of glue on the end of a toothpick allows her to pick up seeds one by one and place them on a piece of canvas board prepared with a pencil outline and smeared with glue. When the toothpick gets too gluey, she discards it for another. A layer of polyurethane seals the seeds in place and, with luck, keeps the bugs away.

Colton has a farming heritage that befits a master crop artist—she grew up on a farm near the Iowa border and recalls helping prepare her father’s grain for exhibit at the Martin County Fair as a girl—but she moved to the city of Owatonna in 1936 and opened a beauty shop, which she ran until just a few years ago. In fact, her career as a hairstylist is more evident in her work than is her childhood on the farm. Her sensitive selection of just the right seeds to suggest the plumage of eagles and roosters, the thick beard of Abraham Lincoln, or the fly-away mop of Albert Einstein seems to reflect the years she spent teasing the unruly waves and curls of her beauty-shop patrons into perfect formation.

Colton uses three hundred different types of seeds in her pictures. A network of acquaintances from the beauty shop supplies her with seeds, as do family members still tending the Martin County farm, which now grows soybeans in addition to the oats, wheat, and corn of her day. She’ll also make an occasional purchase of something like salsify. At around five dollars a pound, seeds for the parsnip-shaped root vegetable are expensive, but a pound of salsify seed goes a very long way, she says. Most of the pictures Colton creates are portraits of well-known national icons and celebrities. Kenny Rogers, Oprah Winfrey, and Korey Stringer (the offensive tackle for the Minnesota Vikings who died of heatstroke during practice last summer) take their place alongside Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Grandma Moses, and Billy Graham in a veritable pantheon of Middle American heroes.

But just as the strip malls on the approach to Owatonna’s modest downtown are dotted these days with Spanish-language signs for groceries and services, the crop art display at the fair has developed an edge that proclaims the changing makeup of Minnesota since the days of its early agricultural boosters. In 1989 a portrait of Haile Selassie (the reformist emperor of Ethiopia deposed in 1974) made of corn, sunflower, millet, wild rice, wheat berries, oats, watermelon, squash, and clover seeds, appeared at the fair, the work of Minneapolis librarian Cathy Camper. The next year Camper contributed Malcolm X to the lineup, and then Spike Lee. Ever since then she has been applying
her trade as a librarian by researching alternative icons to render in seeds. She has taken to spelling out the names of her subjects in seeds somewhere on the picture so that they do not go unrecognized.

Like Colton, Camper also creates crop art creatures. But instead of the delicate feathers of barnyard poultry and wildfowl, Camper chooses to render prehistoric creatures like scorpions and trilobites. Taking advantage of the category of crop art that allows tree parts as well as crop seeds, Camper gathers the giant seed pods of the Kentucky coffee bean plant, brought to Minnesota by settlers and still growing on the shores of a Minneapolis lake, for the scaly segments of the sea scorpion. She looks regretfully at a container of acorns she’s been given by a friend but can’t use—they were gathered in California.

Camper is by no means the only urban hipster to be enchanted by the charm of crop art. Twin Cities addresses dominate the roster of results for last year’s state fair crop art competition. The kitsch of it all—best exemplified by a three-dimensional seed rendering of a deep-fried, cornmeal-battered hotdog on a stick (another staple of the state fair) in a snow globe—is for many an irresistible statement of the urban scene in a metropolis surrounded by heartland. Not content to wait another year for the next state fair, a gallery in Minneapolis’ warehouse district recently brought together the work of twenty crop artists for a midwinter showing, in a studio complex appropriately housed in a former warehouse of the Northrup King seed company. The works of perennial crop art champion Lilian Colton were given a place of honor among the artists represented. The only ribbons on display in this exhibition, however, were a couple of black ribbons saying, “Banned at the MN State Fair 2001.” One of them adored a work by Cathy Camper, which happened to use red lentils to depict the nipples of a female nude. And fig leaves just don’t grow in Minnesota.

NOTES
3. Ibid., 241.
4. World’s Only Corn Palace (Mitchell, SD: CPD Distribution, 1999), inside front cover.
5. Marling, Blue Ribbon, 243.
6. A sampling of Lilian Colton’s crop art is posted online at www.cropart.com, along with submissions by other recent state fair competitors.