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Minnesota Art and Artists:
A Pictorial History, 1820 - 1914
by Rena Neumann Coen

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Rena Coen, an associate professor of art history at St. Cloud State University, traces the history of art in Minnesota from the time of the establishment of Fort Snelling in 1820 to 1914.

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ON THE COVER: Little Crow, 1862 — by Thomas Waterman Wood. Oil on canvas. Courtesy, The Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

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Minnesota Art and Artists:

A pictorial history, 1820-1914

*The state of Minnesota possesses an artistic heritage that reaches far back into the 19th century. With the publication of *Painting and Sculpture in Minnesota, 1820-1914*, by Rena N. Coen (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis), an attempt has been made for the first time, to gather the disparate parts of this heritage into a recognizable body of works. The book was part of a major bicentennial exhibition, *The Art and Architecture of Minnesota*, organized by the University of Minnesota Gallery. The year of 1914 has been chosen as the cutoff date, for that was the year of the great international exhibition at the New York Armory which revolutionized American art. The following article is composed of excerpts from Ms. Coen's book, reprinted by permission of the author and of University of Minnesota Press, and highlights those artists connected with St. Paul and the surrounding region.*

By Rena Neumann Coen

When the Minnesota Territory became the thirty-second state in 1858, it already had a history of accomplishment in the visual arts. As early, in fact, as the first military expeditions that were sent to explore the upper reaches of the great river that divided the country, artists were recording the appearance of the new territory and making it known to an interested eastern public. For in the early days of western exploration, and before the perfection of the camera as a journalistic tool, the artist's pen and brush were the only means of visually describing the wide and fertile river-fed valley that later became the state of Minnesota.

There were a number of such artist-explorers in the Minnesota Territory, for the lure of adventuring into the unknown was as attractive to them as it was to trail-blazers of different talents. George Catlin is the best known but not the only footloose wanderer to have traveled through the area in its early days, and his descriptions, both written and painted, are valuable sources of our knowledge of Indian life in the 1830s.

Even earlier than Catlin, the explorer Jonathan Carver visited the upper Mississippi in 1767, and though he was not an artist, he made a sketch of the Falls of St. Anthony to illustrate the account of his travels. About fifty years later, in 1823, when the map-making expedition of Major Stephen H. Long was sent to find the source of the St. Peter's (now Minnesota) River, it was accompanied by a "zoologist, an antiquary and a landscape painter."

Even while explorers were still mapping the new lands, artists of more settled habits were to be found among the soldiers stationed in the frontier outposts as well as among the settlers themselves. Peter Rindisbacher, a Swiss-born artist who painted scenes in northern Minnesota as early as 1820s, was the first to record Chippewa life and the flora and fauna of the area. Captain Seth Eastman at Fort Snelling also sketched Indian life in Minnesota and later translated those sketches into monumental paintings which were bought by the United States Congress. About 1850 Sergeant Edward K.

Thomas, an obscure soldier and probably self-taught artist from Philadelphia, built up a cottage industry painting views of Fort Snelling which he did while stationed there and sold as prizes of lotteries advertised in the local press. Others, whose names and works are lost today, also drew, sketched, and painted either to entertain themselves in an idle moment or to pursue the practice of art as a serious profession.

SOME OF THESE recorders of the early Minnesota scene eventually established independent reputations as important American artists of the nineteenth century, Catlin and Eastman among them. But there were others . . . whose reputations did not survive them though they were well known and much admired in their own day.

Least known of all, of course, were the folk artists who were frequently anonymous, who had little or no academic training, who labored humbly in the artistic vineyard, and who died in the same obscurity in which they had lived and worked. These artists, "primitives" in varying degree, produced naive portraits of their friends and relations, landscapes, frequently fanciful, for their own or their neighbors' enjoyment, and carved or painted altarpieces for their churches. For these people, art was usually an activity of their leisure hours and not the means by which they earned their living. The avocational aspect of their art is one criterion separating their work from that of the professional.

Besides the professional artists who became Minnesota settlers, others, though not residents of the state, nevertheless had an important role to play in its art history. These were the eastern painters who, from the middle of the nineteenth century to its end, embarked on leisurely sketching expeditions in search of new and "picturesque" subjects for paintings they would finish in their studios back home.

These traveling artists are particularly important not only for their vivid pictorial record of the Minnesota of over a hundred years ago, but also because of the significant link they provide to the mainstream of what has aptly been called the American tradition in art. For these men, influenced though they were by the conventions of European painting (from which, ultimately, American art is derived), nevertheless reflect in attitude, in subject matter, and, to a certain extent, even in style those qualities which we



Inside an Indian Tent — by Peter Rindisbacher. Watercolor. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archeology and Ethnology, Harvard University.

define as peculiarly and typically American.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, there began to emerge a number of painters and sculptors to whom the term "Minnesota artists" might properly be applied. Prominent in this group are Alexis Fournier, Douglas Volk, and Robert Koehler, the last two of whom were early directors of the Minneapolis School of Art (today the Minneapolis College of Art and Design).

OTHERS, TOO, by the beginning of the twentieth century were working professionally and making their home in the state. They came from widely different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Some came as immigrants. Some arrived from the eastern seaboard and some were even born in Minnesota.

The art produced in the state was not, of course, an isolated phenomenon. There is, after all, no such thing as a "Minnesota style." But there is an art that has a strong and self-apparent Minnesota focus and that constitutes a small but important aspect of the wider story of American artistic life. For the art of this nation is more than the sum of its many regional parts, as each region reflects both national cultural trends and its own local history. The tie that binds, then, is neither a definable style nor even a characteristic attitude but a tenuous, though real, sense of shared experience — an identification, however fleeting, with the Minnesota scene.

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Our story properly begins in the 1820s when Minnesota was still very much a frontier territory. Fort Snelling, at the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers, had barely been established as a military outpost to adjudicate recurring quarrels among the Indians, to encourage and protect the fur trade, and to protect the land-hungry immigrants, who, in their eagerness to establish a claim of their own, were pushing America's frontier ever westward.

An artist . . . whose images of the American Indian were enormously influential in later artists' portrayals of the native inhabitants of the West [was] Peter Rindisbacher (1806-1834). Rindisbacher was born in the canton of Berne, Switzerland. In 1821, at the age of fifteen, he immigrated with his parents to the remote and primitive Red River colony that had been established by Lord Selkirk some years earlier near present-day Winnipeg. During his twelfth summer, Peter had wandered through the Alps under the tutorial supervision of the Bernese painter Jacob S. Weibel, and this seems to have been the extent of his artistic training. Weibel's careful miniature portraits and detailed landscapes left a lasting impression on his young pupil's mind. They are reflected in the painstaking drawing and tidy realism with which Rindisbacher later represented the colorful Indian life around him. In spite of his dry and meticulous style, Rindisbacher's work has an immediacy, a feeling

of closeness to his subjects, that leads one to believe that he had easy access to the lodges of the Chippewa, Cree, Assiniboin, and Eastern Sioux of the Manitoba and Minnesota territories. He painted their villages, their mode of travel, their ceremonies, and even their quarrels with each other and with the white man.

BY FAR THE BEST known of the artist-explorers who visited the Minnesota Territory in its earliest years of white history was George Catlin (1796-1872), who made it his lifework to record North American Indian life. During the 1830s, he traveled extensively throughout the West and Southwest sketching and painting forty-eight Indian nations, in order, as he himself wrote, "to rescue from a hasty oblivion a truly noble and lofty race." Catlin's nearly five hundred paintings are an almost complete record of "the living manners, customs and character" of the Indians, and his contribution to American anthropology is further assured by the book he wrote about them. Indeed, Catlin's considerable sympathy for the Indians and his perceptive awareness of their plight is more explicitly described in his published work than in his hasty, impressionistic paintings of them. Thus, though he wrote of the "melancholy fact" of the imminent destruction of Plains Indians' life and drew "the irresistible conclusion that the buffalo is soon to be extinguished and with it the peace and happiness (if not the actual existence) of the tribes of Indians who are joint tenants with them in the occupancy of these vast and

Indians Hunting Buffalo, 1832 — by George Catlin. Oil on Board.
Courtesy, American Museum of Natural History.





Indians at War — by Charles Deas. Oil on canvas. Courtesy, The Northern Natural Gas Company Collection of the Joslyn Museum of Art, Omaha.

idle plains," his *Sioux Indians Hunting Buffalo* painted in 1832, evokes an entirely different response. The quickness of the sketch seems to echo the quickly shifting scene as the frightened animals stampede across the picture plain and the Indians, displaying their legendary skill and daring, pursue them bareback on their swift horses. Even the sharp slope of the hill in the background heightens the suggestion of speed and shifting movement.

Of all the artist-explorers of the 1840s, perhaps the best known among his own contemporaries was Charles Deas (1818-1867), who had, nevertheless, faded into oblivion by the end of the 19th century. Born in Philadelphia to a distinguished southern family, Deas was inspired by Catlin's Indian Gallery and an exhibition he saw of it in 1838. After studying briefly at the National Academy of Design in New York and being elected an Associate National Academician . . . Deas packed his gear and headed for Indian country. In the summer of 1841 he

went up the Mississippi to Fort Snelling where he painted the local scenic landmarks and portraits of the Sioux. He had some difficulties getting the Indians to pose, for they traditionally distrusted representational art. They feared that recognizable likenesses would "take away from their bodies" or physically diminish them and eventually lead to their destruction.

But Deas was interested in more than portraits. He eagerly depicted their dances, feasts, recitations and the ball play for which the Sioux and Chippewa were famous. *Indians At War* was probably a studio piece, based on scenes he may have witnessed during his travels, but meant for popular consumption and distribution through the American Art Union. This important organization in American art history bought artists' works and distributed them through a lottery among its subscribers.

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In its early years, life in the Minnesota Territory was dominated by the military presence of Fort Snelling, the fort that was built in 1819 as the northernmost outpost in a chain of frontier garrisons established in 1817 by John C. Calhoun, secretary of war in the cabinet of President James Monroe.

The artist most fully identified with Fort Snelling, and, indeed, with Minnesota in its early years is Seth Eastman (1808-1875), who is recognized today as one of the most important artists of the American West. Born in Maine in 1808, Eastman graduated in 1829 from West Point, where he had distinguished himself in its drawing classes.

Before the perfection of the camera, sketching and drawing were recognized as important military skills, particularly at frontier outposts where the topography was unknown and the terrain uncharted. Eastman lost no time, therefore, on his first tours of duty at Fort Crawford in 1829 and at Fort Snelling in 1830 in sketching the land and the Indians nearby. In 1840 and, after a year in the Florida War, he returned to Fort Snelling, serving there as a captain and commandant from 1841 to 1848.

WHEN NOT OCCUPIED by his official duties at the post, Seth Eastman applied himself to recording visually the scenes around him. He was inventive enough to have been one of the first to use photographs as an aid in his finished paintings, employing an early type of daguerreotype

camera to capture scenes of Indians dancing, reciting, playing games, and following their daily pursuits. He also used water colors, originally as a sketching tool, but later as an artistic medium in which he recognized an inherent aesthetic quality. These sketches are interesting as historical documents of Plains Indian life, but they also reveal skillful draftsmanship, clear, fresh color, and a masterful ability to capture with a few sure strokes the image of a fleeting moment in a vanished world.

Another painter associated with Fort Snelling in its early days is Sergeant Edward K. Thomas (1817-1906), whose *View of Fort Snelling* was erroneously attributed to Seth Eastman for many years. Thomas was stationed at the fort from 1849 to 1851 and while there painted a number of views of the fort which he produced almost as souvenirs of the frontier outpost. He was a more primitive painter than Eastman and probably self-taught.

Several characteristics in Thomas's *View of Fort Snelling* betray the hand of an unsophisticated artist. Unlike the single vantage point perspective used by Seth Eastman, for example, Sergeant Thomas's landscape stretches out, maplike, before us. Such a bird's-eye view is typical of the primitive artist who tends to scatter precisely detailed

Guarding the Cornfields, 1850 — by Seth Eastman. Watercolor. Courtesy of James Jerome Hill Reference Library.





objects throughout the scene with little regard for compositional unity or the blurring of distant forms in the haze of atmosphere. Thus, the fort in the background is as clearly defined as the Indian tepees in the foreground, and Pike's Island merely occupies space on the canvas without convincingly receding into the distance. A profusion of decorative detail and a rather harsh color scheme also serve to identify Thomas's work and separate it from Eastman's.

More that pertains to the history of art in early Minnesota survives in the work of Frank Blackwell Mayer (1827-1899). Although he was not a soldier himself, he attached himself to the military and came to Minnesota in the summer of 1851 to witness the signing of the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux. President Fillmore had appointed Alexander Ramsey, then governor of the Minnesota Territory, and Luke Lea, United States commissioner of Indian affairs, to make a treaty with the Indians, which ceded to the white man, an estimated thirty-five million acres in what is now southern Minnesota, Iowa, and South Dakota. Mayer, a young Baltimore artist, realized that the gathering of the Sioux nations by the thousands in the Minnesota Valley to participate in the treaty negotiations would be a colorful event, picturesque enough for the most

View of Fort Snelling, c. 1850 — by Sergeant Edward K. Thomas. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of The Minneapolis Institute of Art.

demanding painter's brush. The artist had, in fact, attempted to obtain an appointment in Washington as official artist to the expedition, and, though he failed in this, he did meet Seth Eastman (then living in Washington) who gave the young man encouragement, advice, and useful letters of introduction.

MAYER LEFT Baltimore in May, 1851, and journeyed by railroad, stagecoach, and steamboat to the Minnesota Territory. On June 29 he joined the commissioners for the trip to Traverse des Sioux, a rude trading post and mission station near present-day St. Peter, Minnesota. Here he had ample opportunity to observe and sketch the thousands of Indians gathered there and to describe his impressions of them in sketches and in journal entries. Both these sources vividly recreate pioneer Minnesota with its white settlers, Indian people, men and women of mixed blood, the dragoons at Fort Snelling, the traders and voyageurs from the Canadian settlements, the carts, the keelboats, the tepees and cabins, and, above all, the camp at the treaty site of Traverse des Sioux.

By the 1850s, the decade of its admission to the Union, Minnesota was fast becoming settled territory. Homesteads were staked out, crops planted, industries started, and towns and cities founded. Most important of all, however, for its ties with the rest of the world, a regular steamboat schedule started operating in 1847, instead of the sporadic arrivals and departures — depending on cargo — that had previously been in effect. In the 1860s railroads, too, began to provide regular service to the new state of Minnesota, cementing even more closely its ties to the settled East.

It was still very much of a frontier area, of course — rough, crude, and unfailingly optimistic about its future. But if, with increasing settlement, it began to lose something of the romance associated with the wild, uncivilized West, it nevertheless still boasted many areas of unspoiled natural beauty picturesque enough to attract the more adventurous tourists from the East.

The main attraction was the great river itself. The idea of a fashionable tour up the Mississippi quickly spread, and artists, among others, booked passage on the steamboats. Most were young adventurers on the thresholds of their careers, embarking on a western trip before settling down to the more serious business of life in the studios

of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia.

Among those artists was a German-American of obscure reputation whose talents — both as pictorial historian and as accomplished draftsman — deserve more recognition than they have yet received. Adolf Johann Hoeffler (1825-1898) was born in Frankfurt, Germany, the son of a painter from whom he received his first lessons in art. After further study in the Dusseldorf Academy, he left for America, arriving in New Orleans in 1848, and spent the next years as an itinerant artist, painting portraits for a living and filling his sketchbooks with drawings of the landscapes he saw on his travels. He went up the Mississippi by steamboat, reaching St. Paul in the summer of 1849. Half a dozen sketches of Fort Snelling and other landmarks survive from this trip. The artist appeared in the territory again in the fall of 1852, when he sketched more Minnesota scenes in preparation for an article entitled "Sketches of the Upper Mississippi" that was published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in July, 1853. With the article appeared seventeen woodcuts based on the artist's drawings. One of these is a pencil sketch, *St. Paul* in 1852.

Treaty Site of Traverse des Sioux, 1851 — by Frank Blackwell Mayer. Pencil Drawing. Courtesy of the Edward E. Ayer Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago.





St. Paul, Minnesota Territory, 1852 — by Adolf Hoeffler, Pencil sketch.

The “picturesque” Indian as a subject for the artist had not yet entirely disappeared. Thomas Waterman Wood (1823-1903) of Montpelier, Vermont, and later of New York City, painted *Little Crow* (frontpiece), a Sioux Indian boy, while visiting at Fort

Snelling in 1862. Wood, an artist known for his scenes of country life and of picturesque types, chose, significantly, not an Indian brave but an Indian child dressed as a brave for his subject.

View of the Falls of St. Anthony, 1856 — by Edwin Whitefield. Watercolor.





MOST OF THE PAINTERS discussed so far were artists of some degree of skill and sophistication who considered themselves professionals in the arts. There were others, however, who traveled through Minnesota in its early years, illustrating its scenery in a more naive and unpretentious style. They stand somewhere between the professional artists who came to the area in search of the picturesque wilderness of the American frontier and the unschooled primitives who were soon to be found among the settlers themselves.

Edwin Whitefield (1816-1892) was one such traveler. He first came to the area in the summer of 1855 and found, to his disappointment, that frontier Minnesota was not quite as picturesque as he had been led to believe. However, the place grew on him enough to attract him back the following summer. At that time he added a view of the Falls of St. Anthony flanked by Minneapolis and St. Paul to his album of lithographed views of North American cities.

* * * * *

In the early days of Minnesota's history, the land itself, as well as its colorful, native inhabitants, attracted both exploring artists

The Artist's Paradise — by James Holland Howe. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Hennepin County Historical Society.

and touring ones. They wanted to capture a picture of a vanishing frontier, a fleeting moment in our national story, before it disappeared forever in the advance of white civilization. Once the state was well established, however, and settlers began to replace soldiers, explorers, and adventurers, the art produced by and for them changed as well. For one thing genre painting, the representation of everyday life, began to replace the popularity of the romantic frontier as a subject for the artist's brush.

By the very nature of their status as amateurs, most of the "primitives" are little known, and frequently even anonymous, artists. They were self-taught painters and sculptors whose main business in life — at least in respect to earning a living — was something other than the practice of art. Stylistically, their work is distinguished by a direct approach to visual reality and its representation in naive and literal terms. These terms usually ignore a central focus which subordinates some elements in a composition in order to emphasize others. Primitive artists also ignore academic rules of linear or atmospheric perspective and produce flat,



Tornado Over St. Paul, 1893 — by Julius Holm. Oil on canvas. Loaned to The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Courtesy of Alice Best Rogers of Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, formerly of Minneapolis.

decorative compositions in which pattern and color assume an ornamental purpose of their own.

Not quite so primitive, yet still lacking the easy competence of the true professional, is the work of Jonas Holland Howe (1821-1898), a founder of the township of Plymouth, Minnesota. Howe was a civic-minded person, much involved in local politics. Howe was born in Petersham, Massachusetts, and was moved to Minnesota in 1854 in search of a healthy and invigorating climate for the chronic ill health from which he suffered. Though . . . Howe took up farming as a full-time occupation, he continued to paint pictures too. The paintings that survive are mostly copies of currently popular prints or engravings. One, however, entitled *The Artist's Paradise*, is probably Howe's response to his own surroundings. The artist is shown contemplating a calm lakeside scene, in a subdued color scheme of greens and browns. Though the technical aspects of perspective and three-dimensional form are understood, the static quality of the composition and its rather literal description of man and nature relate it to primitive painting rather than to academic art.

Danger and violence are vividly suggested in Julius Holm's *Tornado over St. Paul* of 1893. Holm is still another artist about whom very little is known, but the sharply object-focused quality of his work underlines his

status as an amateur, or primitive, painter.

IN KEEPING WITH the literal description typical of a primitive painting, several architectural landmarks can be identified in *Tornado over St. Paul*. Prominent on the left are the twin towers of the Church of the Ascension, built in 1871 and still standing today. Over all hovers the ominous black cloud with its tornado funnel, appearing like an apparition of destruction above the roofs of the city. The menace it implies is emphasized by the dark, yellowish light that casts a sulfurous haze over the scene. All who are familiar with tornado weather have experienced this. But however successfully the specific place and particular atmospheric conditions have been presented, the picture still retains the patterned structure and clear narrative quality of the typical primitive painting.

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Training, or the lack of it, in an art school or academy is one of the accepted criteria for distinguishing the professional from a primitive or folk artist. Sometimes, it is a matter of technical skill or sophistication that determines the separation between primitive and professional. Perhaps the attitude of the artist himself is the best measure of his professionalism, for most academic artists aspire to tangible signs of reward from their peers in the academy, while folk

artists usually do not. Whatever the criteria of judgment are, however, one can safely say that professional, *resident* artists began to appear among Minnesota's settlers as early as the first years of its statehood.

An Olmsted County artist who eventually made a reputation as a much sought-after painter was Nicholas R. Brewer (1857-1949), who was born to pioneer parents on a farm near High Forest, Minnesota. His father could not afford to pay his expenses at an art school, but he managed to start him off with a load of wheat — forty bushels — which Nicholas and his brother hauled to Rochester. With the thirty-four dollars from the sale of the wheat, Nicholas boarded a train for St. Paul, where he received his first art lessons from one Henry J. Koempel, a history painter from Cincinnati, whose daughter, Rose, became Brewer's wife. Eventually he was able to study in New York under Dwight William Tryon and Charles Noel Flagg. He returned to St. Paul and later became a successful portraitist and landscape painter.

A LATE BUT UNDATED landscape by Brewer shows the influence of Tryon and other Americans whose style reflected Barbizon aesthetics. Like his teacher, Brewer evokes, with a broad, sure stroke, the placid

stillness of a country scene. There is little emphasis on a specific site, and the misty quiet is emphasized by the absence of man and beast.

James Deverreux Larpenteur (1847-c. 1915) was also a well known artist in the Twin Cities during the 1880s. His 1886 pen and ink drawing of an old log house at the corner of Snelling and St. Anthony avenues reveals the confident stroke of the trained artist. Larpenteur had, in fact, gone to Paris in 1867 and, after a number of years of study and travel there, returned to St. Paul in 1883. He specialized in pictures of European landscapes, though the local scene did, occasionally, catch his eye. His drawing of a log cabin built in 1846 is almost a documentary representation of a rough pioneer homestead. The rain barrels and lean-to shed, the dogs and scratching chickens in the front yard, all describe a life that was simple, hard-working, and close to the soil.

Among the artist settlers . . . though landscapes might frequently have been their preference, portraits were their source of income. Even professional artists were drawn to colorful local "types," whose lives or back-

Landscape of River's Edge — by Nicholas R. Brewer. Oil on canvas. From a private collection.





Log House in Rose Township, 1886 — by James Deverreux Larpenteur.
Pen and ink drawing.

grounds would add intrinsic drama to their portraits.

[One such] local character is portrayed in *Old Bets*, the portrait of an old Sioux woman from Shakopee, painted about 1870 by Dr. Andrew Falkenshield. Falkenshield (1822?-1896) was an immigrant from Denmark who had been a surgeon in the Danish army during the Schleswig-Holstein war. Some time

Portrait of Old Bets, c. 1870 — by Andrew Falkenshield. Possibly a photo-oil.



during the 1850s he came to New York City, where he continued to practice medicine but also took up drawing and painting as a hobby. After a few years there, he moved west, first to Chicago, where he gave up medicine for art, and then, in 1856, to St. Paul. There he opened up a gallery and, apparently, gave instruction in art as well. Falkenshield also took up photography, and it is possible that the portrait of Old Bets was painted over a photograph, a technique not uncommon at the time.

* * * * *

Perhaps no other single event provided as strong an impetus to the development of art in Minnesota as the building of the State Capitol in St. Paul. It was designed and built by the St. Paul architect Cass Gilbert (1859-1934), who worked on the project from 1896, when ground was broken, to January, 1905, when the building was first occupied by the state legislature. The painting and sculpture with which it is decorated form an important chapter in the history of Minnesota art.

FOR PAINTERS, the new capitol in St. Paul provided the opportunity to compose monumental pictures of the history of the state and make allegorical references to its past or future virtues. In typical nineteenth-century fashion, the Board of County Commissioners, who, of course, controlled the purse strings, suggested as themes for the

capitol's murals illustrations of Minnesota's progress from wilderness to civilization, from empty prairie to settled cities and towns. On the whole, what they got was a series of paintings steeped in allegory and delivered with bombast. There are, however, a few distinguished exceptions to the pervasive pedantry of the Capitol's murals, especially in the decoration of the Supreme Court Chamber, whose four lunettes, or architectural recesses, were painted by John La Farge (1835-1910) in 1904. La Farge's murals do not illustrate clichés of progress but deal instead with four specific moments in history that illustrate advances in the relation between law and society. The first, which is positioned over the justices' bench, is entitled *The Moral and Divine Law* and shows Moses receiving the law of God on Mount Sinai. The second, placed over the entrance to the chamber, is called *The Relation of the Moral Law to the State* and deals with Socrates and Cephalus's discourse on the responsibilities of the artist to his subject and to his society. *The Recording of Precedents* to the left of the entrance, pictures Confucius seated in a Chinese garden with his disciples around him. Finally, *The Adjustment of Conflicting Interests* to the right of the chamber's entrance, depicts Count Raymond of Toulouse attempting to balance the conflicting claims of citizen, church, and state.

La Farge was primarily a colorist who felt that, instead of the flat, cool effect desired by most contemporary muralists — including some of the other painters working in

the capitol — mural painting should describe form in rich, warm atmospheric color. The work itself was based on a large number of water-color sketches from which the designs were transferred to canvas. It is a tribute to La Farge's ability, in fact, that he was able to retain a good deal of the glowing color of the water colors in such large *public* pictures as the capitol's lunettes.

SIX MORE PICTURES were originally commissioned as freestanding paintings, though they, too, are permanently installed within carved moldings in the governor's reception room. The artists who were commissioned to execute the paintings were specifically directed to illustrate six glorious events in the history of the state. They chose four scenes of Civil War battles, one of the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux, and one showing Father Louis Hennepin discovering the Falls of St. Anthony in 1680.

Douglas Volk (1856-1935) was the only local painter whose work was represented in the reception room. He was, in fact, the only Minnesota artist (besides the architect himself) to have been invited to do any work for the capitol, for neither Cass Gilbert nor the Board of Capitol Commissioners seems to have made any effort to find and employ local talent. Volk's two capitol paintings are *Father Hennepin Discovering the Falls of St. Anthony* and *The Second Minnesota Regiment at the Battle of Mission Ridge*.

The Civil War picture depicts the Minnesota regiment charging up the ridge and ignoring enemy fire as the soldiers follow the intrepid example of their leader, Colonel

The Moral and Divine Law, 1903 — by John La Farge. Oil on canvas. Lunette, Supreme Court Chamber, St. Paul Capitol.





The Second Minnesota Regiment at the Battle of Mission Ridge — By Douglas Volk.
Oil on canvas. Governor's reception room, St. Paul Capitol.

J. W. Bishop. To achieve literal correctness the artist actually visited the battleground on the forty-second anniversary of the battle. The result is an amalgam of dry realism and self-conscious melodrama — a formula considered appropriate for *public* pictures.

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By the end of the century, Minnesota was no longer a frontier community but a well-established state, in every way an integral part of the national scene. Its painting and sculpture, therefore, not only mirror the wider aspect of American art but reveal its regional characteristics and contributions as well.

One contemporary painter closely identified with Minnesota was Alexis Jean Fournier (1865-1948), who, though born in St. Paul, had spent his early youth in Milwaukee. He returned to Minneapolis in 1883, supporting himself as a sign and scenery painter until, under the sponsorship of a number of Minneapolis patrons of the arts, he was able to enroll as a student in the Minneapolis School of Art.

In 1893, Fournier left for Paris where he enrolled at the conservative Académie Julien under Jean Paul Laurens, Benjamin Constant, and Henri Harpignies. The latter,

especially, was to have a lasting influence on the young Minnesota artist. Harpignies was a follower of the French Barbizon School, a painter of idyllic landscapes composed with great elegance and style.

Most of Fournier's Minnesota paintings belong, however, to his earlier period, when he painted the local scene in a more direct and even matter-of-fact style.

FOR LOCAL HISTORY BUFFS, Fournier's pictures of early Minneapolis and St. Paul are particularly interesting in that they offer still recognizable views of city landmarks. They are instructive stylistically, too, when compared with other and earlier views of the same subject. Fournier's large and ambitious picture of Fort Snelling, painted in 1888, is a case in point. The fort had often, as we have seen, caught the attention of local and traveling artists, for situated as it is high above the confluence of two scenic rivers, it possessed both historic and pictorial importance. Thus, earlier artists had tended to romanticize the subject and to offer "picturesque" views of the fort on its commanding promontory.

Fournier's representation is far different. For one thing, the artist's vantage point is below the fort instead of at a distance overlooking it. This is important because it puts



Ft. Snelling, 1888 — by Alexis Jean Fournier.
Oil on canvas.

the observer in a more direct and immediate relationship with the subject, pulling him inside the picture, as it were, instead of maintaining his distance outside of it. The low vantage point has the effect, moreover, of filling up much of the canvas, thus avoiding the vast and lustrous skies of the romantics. The light itself is more natural. It suggests the clear and unambiguous light of an ordinary day, rather than the stagey glow of an idealized and dramatic moment. The untidy shore (with the scattered remains of an early wooden bridge — replaced now by an iron one high above the river), the shallow riverbed, and the grazing sheep at the foot

of the hill all emphasize the genre quality of Fournier's painting and its focus on the ordinary. In this lies its significant contrast with the out-of-the-ordinary perception of the scene by other artists of more romantic temperaments.

Even when it came to painting a more historic landmark such as the original Chapel of St. Paul, built in 1841 by the pioneer missionary Father Lucian Galtier, Fournier limited his editorial comments to a few Indian tepees in the background and an emphasis on the crudeness of the log cabin church.

Chapel of St. Paul — by Alexis Jean Fournier.
Oil on canvas.



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After the Armory Show and the First World War, Minnesota's painting and sculpture, like American art generally, became more and more a part of the international art scene while yet retaining some characteristically regional features. Its story — from 1914 to the present — forms a separate chapter in the history of American art, and one that has yet to be written.

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THE GIBBS HOUSE

at 2097 West Larpenteur Avenue, Falcon Heights, is owned and maintained by the Ramsey County Historical Society as a restored farm home of the mid-nineteenth century period.

THE Ramsey County Historical Society was founded in 1949. During the following years the Society, believing that a sense of history is of great importance in giving a new, mobile generation a knowledge of its roots in the past, acquired the 100-year-old farm home which had belonged to Heman R. Gibbs. The Society restored the Gibbs House and in 1954 opened it to the public as a museum which would depict the way of life of an early Minnesota settler.

In 1958, the Society erected a barn behind the farm house which is maintained as an agricultural museum to display the tools and other implements used by the men who broke up the prairie soil and farmed with horse and oxen. In 1966, the Society moved to its museum property a one-room rural schoolhouse, dating from the 1870's. The white frame school came from near Milan, Minnesota. Now restored to the period of the late 1890's, the school actually is used for classes and meetings.

Headquarters of the Ramsey County Historical Society will be located in the Old Federal Courts Building in downtown St. Paul, an historic building of neo-Romanesque architecture which the Society, with other groups, fought to save from demolition. The Society presently has its offices at the Gibbs Farm. The Society is active in identification of historic sites in the city and county, and conducts an educational program which includes the teaching and demonstration of old arts and crafts. It is one of the few county historical societies in the country to engage in an extensive publishing program in local history.