

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

THE GOUCHER COLLEGE COLLECTION OF MAYER WATER COLORS

In the introduction to the first volume of the society's series of *Narratives and Documents*, recently published under the title *With Pen and Pencil on the Frontier in 1851: The Diary and Sketches of Frank B. Mayer*, mention is made (p. 22) of a group of thirty-one water-color paintings of Minnesota scenes by Mayer that was acquired by Goucher College, Baltimore, in 1903. This interesting collection has now been sent to the society as a loan through the courtesy of President David A. Robertson and of Professor Katherine Jeanne Gallagher, both of Goucher College.

It will be recalled that Mayer, a youthful Baltimore artist, traveled to Minnesota in 1851 to sketch the Indians of the region and to attend the treaty of Traverse des Sioux. His original diaries and sketchbooks, kept during his travels, and some separate drawings probably made at a later date, are in the Ayer Collection of the Newberry Library in Chicago. The artist long wished to prepare a record of his Minnesota journey for the Minnesota Historical Society; he had in mind transcribing the diary and illustrating it with drawings or water colors based on his sketches. In 1871 he offered to prepare such a collection for about two thousand dollars; several years later he agreed to sell the diary and fifty drawings for a thousand dollars.¹ He seems to have prepared some pencil drawings, for in 1895 Mr. Arthur Bibbins, director of the museum of the Baltimore Woman's College, as Goucher

¹ Mayer to Alexander Ramsey, January 10, 1871; to J. Fletcher Williams, January 31, 1887, Minnesota Historical Society Archives.

College was then called, visited Mayer's studio at Annapolis and saw there sixty-three drawings of Minnesota scenes and characters. To him the artist confided that it had been his "lifelong wish" to "complete these sketches in water colors." It was Mr. Bibbins who drew the matter to the attention of Henry Walters, a well-known Baltimore collector of art works, who agreed to finance the project. For some reason, Mayer does not seem to have started work on the water colors until 1897. Most of the paintings are dated from 1897 to 1899 and a few are undated. Only thirty-one of the sixty-three paintings that he planned to prepare were complete at the time of his death, which occurred on July 28, 1899. Four years later Walters presented the paintings to the Woman's College.²

Among the most charming paintings in the collection are those in which Mayer depicts the life of the Sioux at Kaposia, near the present site of South St. Paul, where he had his first opportunity to observe the natives at close range. As in his sketches, perhaps the most interesting of these pictures is the general view of the village, showing teepees and summer houses and the cemetery on a hilltop in the distance. In general arrangement this painting is much like the pencil sketch of the village reproduced on page 113 of the *Diary*. Another view of the Sioux summer lodges is furnished in a painting labelled "Hoohamaza and his wives." It shows the Indian who took Mayer by canoe from St. Paul to Kaposia with his two wives in a canoe approaching the village. The interior of a lodge, with two Indians and a squaw reclining on the elevated couches built against the walls and a kettle steaming over an open fire in the center, is the subject of another painting. A number of figures in pen and ink, reproduced on page 128 of the *Diary*, are worked into an attractive painting entitled "Leaving for a hunt, Kaposia, 1851." A picture called "The Mourners" probably recalls a scene at the Kaposia

² *Baltimore Sun*, May 11, 1903.

cemetery. Drawings that Mayer made of Sioux children at the village are utilized in the paintings entitled "The pet of the family" and "The unwilling model," and "Pounding hominy—The chief's children."³

A group of five paintings relating to the la crosse game, showing the individual players and the action of the game, illustrates interestingly Mayer's use of the drawings made in Minnesota. In three of them individual players are pictured—one from the front, one from the rear, and another in action. The front view is based on a drawing of a ball-player that is reproduced in the published volume (p. 156). In the painting the breechcloth is represented in bright blue; the ribbons in the hair are yellow and red; spots of red appear on the face. An attractive background showing the prairie at Traverse des Sioux and the Minnesota River has been added. The rear view is worked out in great detail; it shows a Sisseton Sioux whose hair has been carefully dressed and who is wearing the tail or "wamekenunke" described by Mayer on page 152 of his *Diary*. The painting obviously is based upon some extremely rough sketches that appear in volume 41 of the sketchbooks. In the third painting the "wamenkenunke" is again illustrated, this time streaming behind the player as he dashes across the prairie, and an even more elaborate headdress is shown. At the sides and across the crown of the head the hair is plaited, but in the rear it streams loosely. For decoration there is a headband of blue and white, a mass of feathers—probably birds' wings—in a bright vermilion, and a long quill. All the details of this elaborate headdress were worked out on a small scale in a profile drawing of this Indian—"Kampesca (white moss, fungus)"—that Mayer

³ The first of these groups, which shows a papoose, an older child, and a dog in the entrance to a teepee, had been used by Mayer as the basis for an earlier painting, for in the Sketchbooks, 40:49, opposite the drawing on which it is based, the artist wrote: "Sketched for Mrs. Bierstadt Paris 1869. in oil." This drawing is reproduced in the printed *Diary*, 127.

made in Minnesota. The figure in this case is idealized; Mayer's imagination led him to picture the Greek Mercury rather than the Sioux ball-player. The same impulse that inspired him to draw the "Indian Apollo" reproduced on page 156 of the published *Diary*, doubtless led him to paint this "flying mercury." Here the classic outline conflicts strangely with savage coloring and a background in which tepees and other Indians figure.

A group of players "Before the Ball-play" is shown in a fourth painting. Two of these in the foreground are using a pool as a mirror while they decorate themselves with white clay "by smearing the palm of the hand & then patting the surface of the body so as to leave the impression of the hand." Others have completed this ceremony and are walking toward the field of action, their blankets gracefully draped over one shoulder; still others are practicing for the game by swinging their la crosse sticks. Rough drawings of individual figures in this group appear in volume 41 of the sketchbooks. The fifth painting in the group shows the players competing in the la crosse game. More than a dozen figures are seen flying across the prairie, apparently in pursuit of the ball. A goal post that looks much like a May pole appears in the distance to the right; in the background are numerous teepees and groups of spectators; a white man and two Indians repose among the prairie flowers in the foreground watching the game. The painting with some slight variation is based upon an extremely vague and delicate drawing in the sketchbooks, which nevertheless shows clearly the action of the la crosse game. This group of five paintings is a remarkable visual record of the ball game at Traverse des Sioux, so vividly described by the artist in his *Diary*, 150-158.

Mayer also made some of the dances and ceremonies that he observed at Traverse des Sioux the subjects of paintings. The thunder dance, which he describes in great

detail in his *Diary*, 178–184, and which is pictured in a rough sketch, is set forth in an elaborate painting. Unfortunately the artist has lost here much of the life and action so skillfully portrayed in the pencil sketch. A group of three figures is shown in Mayer's painting of the buffalo dance. Mayer pictures also the Mandan dance, in which the Indians are shown revolving around a seated figure playing on a highly ornamented drum. These dances are described in the *Diary*, as is the "Marching Forest" (p. 188, 196–199, 201), also pictured in a painting. A ceremony that is not mentioned in the diary but that is portrayed in a painting is the "Feast of Mondawmin" or "Indian Thanksgiving" — the corn festival of the Sioux.⁴

A portrait of Little Crow, chief of the Kaposia band, in full regalia, might be grouped with the Kaposia paintings, although the drawing on which it is based was made at Traverse des Sioux. It was not until the chief reached that place and was "attired in state" that Mayer could persuade him to sit for a portrait. Brilliant combinations of red and blue help to produce an effect of savage splendor in this painting, but it lacks the strength and ruggedness of the pencil sketch that is reproduced in the *Diary*. Other portraits and individual figures of Indians among the drawings have been used to good effect in the paintings. There are an artistic group of four heads of Sisseton types, a painting of three seated figures labelled "The Three Friends," and a group of five heads that forms the upper part of a painting entitled "The Dakota in Minnesota 1851." Below the latter group is a prairie scene with teepees. A drawing of an unidentified Indian girl that appears in volume 42 of the sketchbooks is used as the cen-

⁴This subject seems to have been a favorite with the artist. A painting of it, prepared for S. J. Wyman of Baltimore, is reproduced in Mayer's *Drawings and Paintings* (Baltimore, 1872). An engraving of the subject, which appears in Henry R. Schoolcraft's *Indian Tribes*, 6: 385, is credited to Mayer. He also painted a small sepia water color of the scene, which is owned by Mr. and Mrs. John Sylvester of Augusta, Georgia.

tral figure in a painting entitled "Winuna. (The first-born)." This may, of course, be intended to represent Nancy McClure, who was also known as Winona, and who is described in some detail by Mayer in his *Diary*, 167-171. This supposition is strengthened by the fact that to the left of Winona in the painting is a bent and gray-clad figure—probably Nancy's grandmother. A figure similar to the latter appears in Mayer's sketch for a painting of the treaty of Traverse des Sioux.

When Mayer came in contact with the Sioux of the Plains at Traverse des Sioux, he became interested in the Indian as an equestrian. Two paintings reflect this interest—"Indians of the plains, Sisseton Dakota," and "Dakota horsemen." In each three mounted figures are shown. Some of the Sioux who gathered at the Traverse for the treaty also are pictured in the painting entitled "A '5 o'clock tea.' Evening meal." "The Council," in which several seated Indians are grouped around a blanketed orator, probably represents one of the conferences that preceded the treaty. From the drawings the central figure is easily identified as Sleepy Eye, a Sisseton chief. A painting entitled "'Singing a present' Sisseton camp" pictures a Sioux begging custom.

A half-breed trapper, tall and graceful, poised on a high bluff overlooking the Mississippi, is the only non-Indian inhabitant of the Northwest portrayed by Mayer in the Goucher College collection. In only one of the paintings is interest centered in scenery rather than people. Here Mayer represents Lakes Harriet and Calhoun—now within the city of Minneapolis—in their original forest setting. Those who have read Mayer's *Diary* will recall that the artist went on an excursion to Lake Calhoun with some of the residents of Fort Snelling. Two pictures in which the Indian is idealized—"Hiawatha and Minnehaha, Sioux brave and bride," and "'The Lady's Man,' Iago, the great boaster"—complete the collection.

Like Mayer's sketch in oil for a painting of the treaty of Traverse des Sioux, which is owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, these water-color paintings show how the artist used the sketches made during his journey to the frontier in 1851. In his finished work, Mayer lost some of the rugged vitality that is characteristic of his sketches, but by adding color he furnished a more complete record than was possible when he worked with pencil only. In order that the members of the society and readers of its publications may have an opportunity to see these paintings, plans are being made to exhibit them in the society's museum early in December.

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