

# *A Pioneer Minnesota Artist*

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IN THE COLLECTION of the Hennepin County Historical Society in Minneapolis are four oil paintings by Jonas Holland Howe, an artist whose work in Minnesota has not been given recognition previously. Although Howe's place in the history of Hennepin County is of considerable importance, his activity as an artist has been, outside his family, almost completely forgotten. He was born in Petersham, Massachusetts, in 1821.<sup>1</sup> As a young man he intended to become a painter, but with the failure of his health he was obliged to take up the active life of a farmer in a more invigorating climate than that of his home state. He moved to Minnesota in 1854, and there he lived until his death in 1898, serving the community in which he settled in a wide range of public offices. He took a leading part in the organization of Plymouth Township, where his farm was located; he was the township's first clerk; and he later served as justice of the peace and as an officer of the local school district. He assisted in the formation of a company known as the Plymouth Home Guards, and was second in command of this temporary militia unit during the Sioux Uprising of 1862. After serving as an enlistment officer in the Union army during the early years of the Civil War, he was actively engaged in the conflict in 1864 and 1865 as first sergeant in Company F, Eleventh Minnesota Volunteer Infantry.

Politically he was an adherent of President Lincoln, and later he became an ardent worker in the Populist and People's parties, as well as a long-time friend and co-worker of Ignatius Donnelly. He served as a representative in the state legislature in 1866, worked with Oliver Kelley in founding the Patrons of Husbandry, better known as the National Grange, and lectured for that organization in many communities of central Minnesota. A facile writer on agricultural, economic, and political

<sup>1</sup> For biographical information on Howe, see Isaac Atwater and John H. Stevens, eds., *History of Minneapolis and Hennepin County*, 1306 (New York, 1895); George E. Warner, *History of Hennepin County and the City of Minneapolis*, 334 (Minneapolis, 1881); Warren Upham, *Minnesota Biographies*, 347 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 14); and Laura Howe Carpenter, *Reminiscences of Pioneer Life*. The latter, an undated pamphlet of sixty-four pages by Howe's daughter, contains not only her own impressions of Minnesota frontier life, but genealogical material, copies of family letters, photographic copies of some of Howe's paintings and miniatures, and other pertinent items. Much of the material on Howe's artistic career given herewith is drawn from this booklet and from family letters. The Hennepin County Historical Society's paintings were presented in 1941 on behalf of the Howe family by Mr. Charles H. Howe of Minneapolis.

subjects, he was a frequent contributor to *Farm, Stock and Home*, an agricultural paper popular in the 1870's.

Howe assisted also in founding the State School for the Deaf at Fari-bault, and his eldest daughter was one of the first graduates of that institution. All six of Howe's daughters were teachers in the rural schools of Hennepin County, and his only son, James Benjamin Howe, served in many of the same modest township offices which had been filled earlier by his father. The Howe farm, still in the possession of the family, is now operated by Mr. John Jonas Howe, grandson of the pioneer.

Information concerning Howe's activities as a painter is meager. The strain of artistic talent in his family has been traced back as far as the grandparents of the artist, Basmath Gould and Joel Negus. Their family of thirteen included a number of children who are said to have displayed some talent as artists. One of these children, Nathan Negus, is known today as one of the best of the indigenous artists of the Connecticut Valley. In the strict sense, he was not a true primitive painter, having received some instruction from John Greenwood and J. R. Penniman. He worked in Boston for a short time, and later in Savannah and Mobile. He died at Petersham at the age of twenty-four.<sup>2</sup> His daughter Caroline was a professional artist, although she was perhaps better known as the wife of Richard Hildreth, the historian. Still another daughter of Basmath Negus married Aaron Fuller at Deerfield, Massachusetts. Their son was George Fuller, who figures in the history of American art as a notable exponent of personal mysticism in painting. Still a third daughter, Arthusa, married Jonas Howe, and Jonas Holland Howe was her second son.

With the artistic precedent well established in the family, it is not improbable that Jonas Howe studied drawing and painting in his early youth. We know that he attended school in Hardwick under the Reverend John Goldsbury and later went to the academies at Deerfield and New Salem. We know, too, that as a young man of twenty-three he went to Boston with his cousin George Fuller. There they began their formal study of art, chiefly with their aunt Caroline Hildreth, and under her tutelage they came into contact with some of the leading artists of the day, the sculptor Thomas Ball and the painter Daniel Huntington among them.

In his autobiography, Ball recalls the "hopeful days between 1846 and 1850" when he and Fuller "were wrestling together with color" in attic rooms in Boston's Tremont Row. "I had at that time," writes Ball, "the

<sup>2</sup> Carpenter, *Reminiscences*, 44, 50. Some of Negus's portraits are noted in *Somebody's Ancestors*, a catalogue of an exhibition of paintings by primitive artists of the Connecticut Valley, held in the Springfield Museum of Fine Arts from February 7 to March 8, 1942.

very top floor, under the roof, the rafters of which were gazing down on me in all their rough nakedness until I veiled them with a casing of cheap calico. George occupied the room directly under me, making it convenient to take our pictures into each other's room, as we proceeded with our work, for comparison and criticism. We were then struggling after Allston's color; being fascinated, as were all the young artists of that day, with his unfinished canvases which had been exhibited not long before. 'Belshazzar's Feast' was our particular study, as that seemed to show his method in all stages of his work. I think the effect of his then admiration for that great artist can be traced in all Mr. Fuller's works."<sup>3</sup>

Writing also of Fuller, William Dean Howells gives another and even closer view of the life led by the young artists. He records that "George's studio in Boston was first located in School Street. Probably the artist Hollingsworth and an elderly painter, Hewins, whose forte was rather restoring old paintings than creating new ones, occupied the same building. He had with him (during this early student period) a cousin, J. H. Howe, who used the palette long enough to show that he had in him the material for an artist, and then went to farming in Minnesota. They lived a Bohemian life that had its charms, sleeping in their studio behind some brown cambric curtains, and sometimes getting their meals outside, and occasionally doing their own cooking. . . . They had modest tin shingles attached to the stone door-posts below, giving their names and number of room, to which was added the legend 'Portrait Painter'. Many of the visitors seemed to have no particular errand, save that of looking round, and such were apt to be disappointed, for the picture gallery was limited, and the decorations humble in the extreme. Much of the work was the copying of old-fashioned daguerreotypes, that had to be held at a certain angle to the light to be seen and admired. These were generally of deceased persons, to be painted, life size in oil."<sup>4</sup>

Fuller became a member of the Boston Artist's Association shortly after his arrival in the city and he worked regularly in its studio. There both living models and casts were provided for members. It is not improbable that Jonas Howe also attended these sessions. No further trace of Howe's name or activity in Boston has been found. It is known only that he abandoned art for farming in Minnesota Territory. The story of his life there has been recorded by his daughter.<sup>5</sup>

Only one of the four paintings now in the Hennepin County Historical Society's collection appears to be the work of Howe's youth. Probably painted between 1845 and 1854, it depicts an Indian girl crossing a nar-

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Ball, *My Three Score Years and Ten*, 112 (Boston, 1892).

<sup>4</sup> J. B. Millet, ed., *George Fuller: His Life and Works*, 22 (Boston, 1886).

<sup>5</sup> Carpenter, *Reminiscences*, 3-35.

row stream on stepping stones.<sup>6</sup> An arrangement of water, foliage, rocks, and clouded sky provides a conventional backdrop. The girl holds a white fringed garment about her, and as she moves forward, her right arm outstretched, she looks back at the shore as though she were being pursued. There is little color in the picture, the artist's palette consisting of black, gray, dull browns, and greens. The handling is simple, without any apparent concern for texture or atmosphere. The artist's real interest is centered in the figure of the girl. She is a highly idealized representation of an Indian, clearly labeled by such details as skin color and costume, fair of form, noble in character — a thoroughly romantic creation. Graceful in proportion and movement, the figure is painted with considerable fluency, but also with a certain superficial smoothness and facility which is particularly noticeable in the execution of the hands and feet. The drawing, such as it is, is the kind which is easily learned and variously useful to a painter of conventional and somewhat romantic sentiments. It is in this connection that the picture is of interest, for it is a small but pure sample of the romanticism present in American painting of the 1840's.

In the Boston of that decade many young artists were the devoted admirers of Washington Allston, who was the American romanticist par excellence. We know that Thomas Ball was among these admirers, and it was probably true of Howe as well, although he arrived in Boston in the year following Allston's death. Commenting on the Athenaeum exhibition of 1843, Fuller wrote to a friend then in Italy: "I think the best picture in the room is Allston's *Saul and the Witch*. It is the only specimen I have ever seen of that great man. You will be grieved to hear he is dead. . . . The greatest of modern painters is gone, and on whom does his mantle fall?"<sup>7</sup>

One of Allston's pictures, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, provides a striking parallel to Howe's painting. This is the well-known "*Spanish Girl*." In the two pictures there is the same concentration on mood, the same implication of a literary or poetic meaning or libretto, the same pretty gracefulness of pose, the same simplified technique, color scheme, and composition. As a picture, Howe's "*Indian Maiden*" is certainly of less interest from a purely technical standpoint than the work of Allston or of most of his better-known contemporaries. His attitude toward his subject, however, is essentially the same and, to a very considerable extent, his result is comparable.

<sup>6</sup> All the Howe paintings are in oil on canvas. That of the Indian girl measures twenty-three and seven-eighths by nineteen and three-fourths inches. The stretcher bears the inscription, "owned and painted by Jonas H. Howe."

<sup>7</sup> Millet, *George Fuller*, 18.

The remaining pictures in the group probably date from the last years of Howe's life, when, because his family urged him to do so, he again took up painting as a hobby. One of these pictures, in some ways the most interesting in the group, is entitled "Bay of Naples at Sunset."<sup>8</sup> In contrast to the rather academic niceties of the "Indian Maiden," this is a work of peculiarly personal quality. If we did not know that the artist was studio trained, the picture could be regarded as the work of a genuine primitive. The subject is a big one, full of spatial and atmospheric problems which would have presented a considerable task to any painter, especially to one whose contact with the prototypes of such views must have been almost negligible. This canvas and another entitled "Bay on the Coast" probably were derived from other representations of the subjects, but it is difficult to suggest what sources Howe might have used. They are obviously reflections of work in the European landscape tradition, and it would seem most reasonable to assume that Howe may have seen engravings of such pictures.

The artist's approach to his subject in the "Bay of Naples at Sunset," although it may have been based on an imitative impulse, is notably different from that in his "Indian Maiden." In a sense, Howe does not seem to have been entirely certain of the management of all the elements of his picture, but he persevered in the pleasure he got out of his work and let technical considerations take care of themselves. The result is a piquant combination of inconsistencies. The shoreline, for instance, does not recede in accordance with normal perspective, but ends in the center of the picture and is, in effect, a vertical rather than a horizontal plane. Beyond this, Howe indulged himself in an array of details which for all their sketchy execution show a lively feeling for decorative values. Most interesting of the details are a carriage, cleverly foreshortened from the rear, and lanterns mounted on posts along the edge of the quay like so many common pins. These factors, together with a true feeling for the rendering of texture and atmosphere in terms of color, result in an altogether charming picture. It would seem that the painter was more interested in the pictorial problem than with descriptive story telling.

"Bay on the Coast" is less interesting than Howe's other pictures because it shows fewer touches of individuality and adheres more strictly to the romantic landscape formula. It combines standard ingredients: sunlit mountains, a church and bell tower, buildings piled up on the shore of a lake, a sailing vessel, and a foreground filled with the inevitable

<sup>8</sup> The "Bay of Naples at Sunset" measures nineteen and seven-eighths by twenty-seven and seven-eighths inches; the "Bay on the Coast," twenty-one and three-fourths by twenty-five and seven-eighths inches. The artist's name and the date 1881 are inscribed on the stretcher of the former.

picturesque detail, ruins, creeping vegetation, idling figures in brightly colored costumes, and — an apt suggestion of a sunny idyl — a large melon hidden in a corner between a bank of earth and a fallen building stone.

The last picture in the group, entitled "Artist's Paradise," probably represents Howe's reaction to the Minnesota scene.<sup>9</sup> The subject is a calm, lakeside landscape. A contemplative mood is established by still reflections in the water, by the slow movement of massed clouds, and by the static figure of a man who studies the scene. The color scheme is limited to green and brown, heightened by purer touches of the same colors plus some blue white and yellow. The handling is dry. There is throughout the technique of the amateur, with little of the formulated flourish and effect of Howe's other pictures. This picture also illustrates another aspect of Howe's work. It is a straight-forward transcription of the painter's own experience and, although it is the plainest of the group, it is in a sense the most original. Howe saw the inherent simplicity of his subject and was able to paint it in that spirit.

Not one of this group of paintings is important in a large historical sense. They have none of the topographic or reportorial value of the work of Seth Eastman, George Catlin, or Henry Lewis. With the exception of the last, these pictures do not reflect in any direct way the fact that the artist resided in Minnesota. Their importance lies almost entirely in their quality as pictures, as the creations of an undeveloped taste and skill. They are minor works of art. But they do prove that Jonas Holland Howe, in addition to being a man of civic prominence, was also an artist of ability.

<sup>9</sup> This picture measures seventeen and three-fourths by twenty-three and three-fourths inches.



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