

# *Peter Rindisbacher, Swiss Artist*

INTRODUCTION BY MICHEL BENISOVICH

TRANSLATED BY ANNA M. HEILMAIER

F. O. PESTALOZZI, who contributes a short sketch of Peter Rindisbacher to a European dictionary of Swiss artists, gives as his source of information two articles published in German in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*.<sup>1</sup> Copies were obtained by the writer through the courtesy of Dr. J. Welti of that paper, who had them made from the original files in Zurich. They appeared in 1870, thirty-six years after Rindisbacher's death.

These articles, here presented in translation, add to the story of the artist's life as it has been reconstructed by Grace Lee Nute, Margaret Arnett MacLeod, John Francis McDermott, and others.<sup>2</sup> After reading them, the writer concluded that they, in turn, were probably translated or reprinted from an English or German newspaper published in St. Louis, since they contain references to members of that city's German colony and to art collectors among them. Although Pestalozzi seems to think that they might have been written by the Major Hughes mentioned in the text, there is nothing to support this assumption and they are signed with the initials "F.M." That they have escaped the attention of researchers may well be due to the absence of an index of St. Louis newspapers. The original articles seem to have appeared long after Rindisbacher's death. The suggestion that Rindisbacher's work influenced "several European artists" is of interest in view of the fact that at least two Swiss artists of a later generation—Karl Bodmer and Rudolf Friedrich Kurz—devoted themselves to depicting the American Indians.

<sup>1</sup> For Pestalozzi's sketch, see Carl Brun, *Schweizer Kuenstler-Lexikon*, 2:630 (1908). A copy is in the New York Public Library. The articles in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* are in the issues of April 13 and 14, 1870 (nos. 187 and 189). The only file known to the writer is in Zurich. Another sketch of Rindisbacher, signed by H. Tribolet, appears in volume 5 of the *Dictionnaire historique et biographique de la Suisse* (Neuchatel, 1930). A copy is in the reference library of the United States State Department international broadcasting division in New York. The only information added by this sketch relates to the family name of the Rindisbachers, which is said to come from that of a village in Bern canton, M.B.

<sup>2</sup> See Grace Lee Nute, "Peter Rindisbacher, Artist," and "Rindisbacher's Minnesota Water Colors," in *Minnesota History*, 14:283-287, 20:54-57 (September, 1933, March, 1939); Margaret Arnett MacLeod, Grace Lee Nute, and Clifford Wilson, "Peter Rindisbacher, Red River Artist," a symposium in the *Beaver*, December, 1945, p. 30-36; and John Francis McDermott, "Peter Rindisbacher, Frontier Reporter," in the *Art Quarterly*, 12: 129-145 (Spring, 1949).

[From the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, April 13, 1870.]

### RINDISBACHER, THE PAINTER<sup>3</sup>

IF ONE WHO HAS SEEN any of this young artist's originals loves the arts and has a taste for the beautiful, he must agree that both Rindisbacher's work and name deserve to be more widely known. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to focus attention on any of his original works and paintings which must exist in various places.

It is surprising that it has not occurred to any art patron among this German painter's compatriots to publicly call attention to him or to bring to light examples of his work. To be sure, in Rindisbacher's time the German population of St. Louis was smaller than it is now, and his most important patrons and friends were Americans who were satisfied to know that Rindisbacher was a skillful painter. Major Hughes of Washington is one notable exception. As soon as he was informed of the death of the young artist, he inquired into his life history and subsequently made an effort to obtain the works remaining in his studio. For these Hughes generously paid the heirs a considerable sum.<sup>4</sup> So it is that Rindisbacher's most interesting paintings are owned by this man.

Now and then, however, some of his works are found in St. Louis and its vicinity. Among the Germans, Mr. Angelrodt owns two excellent originals. It would be desirable if some of the best items could be published as good lithographs or engravings. Such publication probably has been prevented in the past by the owners of the originals, who believed, perhaps not unjustifiably, that works unique in their genre might become too common. But poor copies certainly are more to be feared than good reproductions, as the unsatisfactory imitation of Rindisbacher's "Indian War Dance," which recently was published with the allegorical appellation "Native Americans," makes obvious.

Rindisbacher was a miniaturist, for he painted in aquarelle. Oil painting he is reputed often to have called smearing, which is understandable, considering the nature of the crude colors. This aversion apparently resulted from habit, because he could not conveniently carry oil colors with him and prepare them on his travels; moreover, during his long sojourn in the North, he could not obtain oil colors and therefore was limited to the use of water colors, with which he did his best work. Later he worked

<sup>3</sup>The following footnote appears at this point: "The obituary of Rindisbacher is taken from an American paper. Although it deals with one who died some time ago, its publication in our paper is nevertheless justified because it deals with an important Swiss artist who is almost completely forgotten in his native land."

<sup>4</sup>Although Mr. Benisovich has been unsuccessful in identifying Major Hughes, he suggests the possibility that the West Point collection might be traced back to Hughes's purchase. For a description of the Rindisbacher water colors at the United States Military Academy, see Nute, in *Minnesota History*, 20:54. Miss Nute could find no information on the origin of this collection.

also in oils where specifically required, but we do not believe that any important work by him exists in this medium.

Although he showed his talent and proved his ability as a genre painter, it is above all as a painter of historical subjects and of animals that he is unique. Indeed he deserves the distinction of being the first to picture the geography and particularly the natural history of some parts of North America. The life, customs, and social conditions of various Indian tribes he depicted many times in a variety of scenes. So we see the red men, for example, sometimes in hordes, in fierce battle, swinging frightful tomahawks or murderous clubs. Sometimes in single combat, on foot or on horseback, one is shown piercing the naked body of another with an arrow or a spear. The Indians are pictured in war games and dances, as they move their threatening weapons to the accompaniment of drum beats and battle cries; in social gatherings, enjoying a keg of brandy acquired by trade with the whites and deporting themselves most curiously in their drunkenness; and standing in a circle, holding council or bargaining with the whites. In another view one native shows his traveling companion a trophy—the scalp of his vanquished enemy. Rindisbacher also pictures Indians gliding along a river in a canoe paddled by women, while the man, seated in the bow, leisurely smokes his pipe or, armed with a gun, watches for game birds. In short, there is hardly a situation in Indian life which the artist has not faithfully put on paper with his magic brush for others to see.

Rindisbacher's pictures of bison or buffalo hunts clearly show the characteristics of these animals. We see them in herds, grazing peacefully side by side. Pursued by the hunter, they are pictured as they hurry away through the tall prairie grass, or over the brush, or through deep snow in mighty leaps. A wounded bull is shown as he hurls himself in wild rage upon his enemy; another, attacked by a pack of dogs, is pictured fighting them.

And in all these views every movement of man and beast is most accurately delineated and seems to show the proper muscles under strain. Everything is in pleasing contrast and is worked out in accordance with the strictest rules of perspective without appearing artificial. All Rindisbacher's groupings are imaginative and well chosen, and the position of the figures is natural and powerful. Just as his designs are excellent, his coloring is vivid. His portraits are expressive, in deepest shadows or in brightest lights, with delicate gradations, true to nature, and striking in their resemblance to his subject. Each hair of the bison, deer, otter, and dog appears to be individually shaded and seems to glisten. The plumage of the birds is so lifelike that one imagines he can discern a shimmering change in the colors. Everything delights the soul and pleases the eye.



Alas-Lewis's copy

Drawn by F. Rindisbacher.

### INDIAN SHOOTING GAME BIRDS

[A Rindisbacher engraving from the *American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine*, October, 1832.]

The splendor of the billowing clouds in his landscapes, the transparency of the atmosphere and distance, the delicate shading of the ground colors, the gracefulness of the vegetation, the bleakness of the snow scenes—all are pure representations of Nature, which the artist chose as his only true teacher. His were no ordinary talents and he made the very best use of them. What he created deserves recognition. In view of this conviction, we deem it a pleasant duty to publish here in brief the information which Major Hughes, to whom we previously referred, obtained while inquiring into Rindisbacher's life.

[From the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, April 14, 1870.]

Peter Rindisbacher, the son of a landed farmer of the same name, was born on April 12, 1806, in Upper Emmenthal in the canton of Bern, Switzerland. Even in early youth he showed a marked interest in pictures and paintings, and he could be seen looking intently at pictures of his forebears' heroic deeds, which often are held up to the young and impressed upon them. When he was six years old he no longer was content merely to look at such pictures; his attraction to them became a passion and he began to copy them. Wherever he could lay hands on a piece of chalk or charcoal, he was impelled to draw, and because he used walls and doors for his sketching, he was often severely reproved by his parents. His schoolteacher also looked with disapproval on the budding talent of the young limner, and frequently reprimanded him sternly. Nothing, however, could keep him from drawing on every piece of paper his schoolmates threw away. If his father had not upheld him somewhat, the boy's native talent probably would have been stifled and killed under the stern schoolmaster's rod. But the father supplied his son with paper, pencils, and paints, whereupon he became much more obedient and dutiful in all respects and discontinued defacing his schoolbooks.

By the time he was eight his talent and his interest in drawing had developed to such a degree that his grandparents, forthright country folk, seriously remonstrated with young Peter's father, declaring that it would be better if he put his son to work in the fields and made a respectable farmer of him. Although he showed no interest in farming, as a dutiful son Peter nevertheless performed uncomplainingly all the light tasks assigned to him. At last the father saw that when his son was thus occupied he lost his former liveliness, and he determined to let the boy follow his artistic bent. About the same time a not insignificant musical talent showed itself in Peter, and at an early age he learned to play the zither fairly well under his mother's instruction.

He also expressed a preference for a military career and soon became a soldier. When he was only ten years old he became a volunteer, serving

as a drummer in a company of Bernese grenadiers. At this tender age he fulfilled his six months' compulsory military service. Although he was so young, his punctiliousness and singular nature won him the admiration and love of his officers and comrades, all of whom showered him with kindness. For drill and maneuvers he served as signal drummer. But often when he had leisure, overcome by an urge to draw, he could be seen sitting on his drum sketching scenes about him. When he painted people—the officers, for example—the likenesses were so authentic that one could recognize the subject immediately. On one occasion Peter could not resist portraying an officer of the dragoons who rode a horse very poorly. His characteristic pose was so well pictured by the young artist that, seeing himself as in the flesh, the officer became enraged and surely would have punished the little grenadier drummer if he had not been the darling of the company.

When he was twelve years old, Peter took a little trip with the painter [Jacob S.] Weibel into the mountains of his native land. From Weibel he received his first instruction in drawing.<sup>5</sup> Peter's sketches—for the most part scenes of his fatherland, the Bernese highlands, and Italian Switzerland—were later developed into paintings under Weibel's guidance, and even at that time they were considered very good for so young an artist.

In 1821, when Peter was fifteen, we find him on a journey to northern Canada. Lord Selkirk, ostensibly in the interest of England, had wanted to establish a German colony on the Red River or in Rupert's Land. Peter's father and 187 others, mostly Swiss from the canton of Bern, had contracted with one of Selkirk's authorized agents to settle there.<sup>6</sup> Beginning with the sea voyage, which lasted a full fourteen weeks, the young painter found a vast new field for his brush. Numerous very good pencil sketches, which are still in his father's possession, are evidence that he made good use of this opportunity. They represent scenes and situations in which the travelers found themselves on the high sea, among icebergs, and in Hudson Bay. The last of these drawings illustrates their eagerly awaited landing, and shows them being welcomed by Eskimos.<sup>7</sup> Im-

<sup>5</sup> At the time of Rindisbacher's Alpine trip with Weibel in 1818, the latter had published a successful guide for students of drawing under the title *Nouveaux principes de dessin*. A second edition appeared in 1820. Although Rindisbacher probably learned the first rudiments of his art from this painter and engraver, Pestalozzi considers their association too brief to leave any impact on Rindisbacher, describing the latter as self-taught. See Brun, *Schweizer Kuenstler-Lexikon*, 2:630. M.B.

<sup>6</sup> Selkirk died a year before the Swiss colonists arrived. The agent in Switzerland was Captain Rodolphe de May, a native of Bern who had joined the British army as a mercenary. One writer reports that he recruited 170 Swiss colonists; another sets the figure at "fifty-seven adults, including heads of families." John Perry Pritchett, *The Red River Valley, 1811-1849*, 221, 224 (New Haven, 1942); MacLeod, in the *Beaver*, December, 1945, p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> Evidence that some of these drawings remained in the Rindisbacher family is to be found in three sketches owned by the artist's great-grandnephew, C. H. Rindisbacher of

mediately our painter made many interesting sketches of these Indians, just as he did in the course of his travels among other northern tribes. Here, too, he was first attracted by native animal life, and he began preliminary work on a natural history of northern America. Although he made a diligent effort to produce a fine work, his untimely death prevented its completion.

York Fort, the main port of the Hudson's Bay Company, was the landing place of the party. From this point the travelers continued their journey inland in small boats up the Hill [*Hayes?*] River.<sup>8</sup> Along the way young Rindisbacher saw a scouting party of Chippewa Indians from Lake Winnipeg and sketched the most striking among them. On November 1, 1821, the colonists reached their destination.

R[indisbacher] occupied the long winter at Red River by putting in order the sketches he had made on the journey. He spent much of the first part with the Governor, who felt very kindly toward him. Later he was employed as a clerk by the fur company, and, while he received a very small salary, the work gave him excellent opportunities to discover new subjects for his restless brush and particularly to become familiar with the manners and customs of the Indians. Indeed the governor, Captain Bulscher [*Andrew Bulger*], later went so far as to outfit a hunting party of trusted Indians and half-breeds for the young painter's benefit, thus giving him the very best opportunity to observe closely the bison hunt, in which he was especially interested, and so enabling him to picture it in good drawings.

In this way our artist was occupied until the spring of 1826, when suddenly a mighty thaw set in, which, however, did not melt the ice in the lakes into which the rivers of that area flowed. As a result, the rivers were blocked at their outlets, causing a great flood in which the colonists lost the fruits of their years of labor as well as their possessions.<sup>9</sup> Discouraged, most of them decided to migrate to the United States. To this end Father Rindisbacher assembled a traveling party of twenty-three families. The emigrants accordingly commenced their journey on July 11, 1826. Their way went across the vast prairies of the north, the tableland of Lake Travers[e], from which the waters flow on the one side to the Red River and on the other to the St. Peters [*Minnesota*] River and the Mississippi.<sup>10</sup> A description and detailed account of the adventures and Minocqua, Wisconsin, and described by Miss Nute in the *Beaver* for December, 1945, p. 34. In connection with the present narrative, it is of interest that one, reproduced on p. 31, pictures an Eskimo family.

<sup>8</sup> York Factory, as the port on Hudson Bay usually is known, is at the mouth of the Hayes River.

<sup>9</sup> The destructive flood of 1950 was caused by identical conditions.

<sup>10</sup> The waters of Lake Traverse drain northward to Hudson Bay; those of Big Stone Lake,

hardships of our travelers would be well worth while, but it does not belong here.

Galena was the first stopping place of the Rindisbacher family. There the young painter, richly laden with most interesting sketches and notes, again had leisure to put his treasures in order and to develop them. In addition to many landscapes and pictures of animals, he had made a great many sketches of Indians, picturing members of most of the tribes of the regions through which he passed. Among them were Assiniboin, various Sioux tribes, Winnebago[e]s, Sax [*Sauk*] and Fox Indians. He lived in Galena for three years, and then moved to St. Louis, where his individual and engaging personality soon won him many patrons and made even the rough natives, the Indians, his friends. Here he devoted himself wholly and with all his heart to art, and was generally respected and admired both as a man and as an artist. Now it seemed that even Death envied him, and unfortunately overtook him all too soon. In the prime of life, just when his artistic genius was expressing itself in its full glory, he died, of cholera it is said, in the middle of August, 1834. Mourned alike by friends and acquaintances, he passed away all too soon for Art, which suffered a great loss in his death.

Only a few of Rindisbacher's hunting scenes appeared in the "Sporting Magazine" as engravings.<sup>11</sup> It thus would be gratifying if the best of his remaining paintings could be published as carefully executed reproductions. That should be possible with the help of our German friends in the Eastern states. Such a course is the more to be desired because several European painters already have made sketches of some of Rindisbacher's works and probably will publish them in their native lands under their own names.<sup>12</sup> Rindisbacher's pictures should forever preserve his identity, for they are valuable in many respects. Not only do they picture a new and little-treated field, but they stand as the productions of an untrained artist who ever pursued the beckoning of the greatest teacher of all creation — Nature.

F. M.

only a few miles to the south, drain into the Mississippi system and flow to the Gulf of Mexico. On their southward trek, the emigrants passed through the present state of Minnesota. Many of the water colors in the Rindisbacher collection at West Point evidently were based upon sketches made by the artist on this journey, since they depict Minnesota Indians and scenes. Nute, in *Minnesota History*, 20:54.

<sup>11</sup> The full title of the periodical is the *American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine*. It was published in Baltimore from 1829 to 1844. For a list of Rindisbacher's pictures in this periodical, see Nute, in *Minnesota History*, 14:286.

<sup>12</sup> That this actually happened to a series of views made by Rindisbacher at Red River in 1823 and 1824 is revealed by Wilson in the *Beaver* for December, 1945, p. 34-36.



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