

The J. O. Lewis Port Folio

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THOUGH THE INDIAN portraiture of James Otto Lewis, known to us only through the crude lithographs of his *Aboriginal Port Folio*, may have little value in the history of the art of painting, the collection he made of faces and costumes forms the first important pictorial record of American Indian life.¹ It is especially valuable for the upper Mississippi country, since the subjects are largely Chippewa, Sioux, Pottawatamie, Menominee, Fox, Sac, and Winnebago Indians. Any library having even an incomplete set of the lithographs must regard it as a special treasure.

The lithographs of the *Aboriginal Port Folio* were engraved from paintings by Lewis done in the 1820's and early 1830's under the patronage of Lewis Cass. Original sketches were made by the artist at various treaty sessions at Prairie du Chien, Fond du Lac on Lake Superior, Green Bay, and other points on the frontier from 1825 to 1827. The actual work of painting in most instances was accomplished in Detroit. The publication of the portraits was no doubt inspired by the knowledge that Thomas L. McKenney was planning a similar book and was expecting to use some of Lewis' work.² Whatever the reason, Lewis came before the public first. His *Aboriginal Port Folio* was issued in

parts, the first of which appeared in May, 1835. By the evidence of dated cover sheets, it is certain that the parts appeared as planned at monthly intervals. Lewis himself was an engraver in the stipple manner, but Lehman and Duval of Philadelphia were responsible for the lithography. F. Barincou, whose signature is found on most of the plates, was probably the actual lithographer.

There is no absolute assurance of the original sequence of plates in a full set of this rare publication. Issued in parts and with the plates loose, a great many sets were broken up, and the order of pictures in bound copies today varies a good deal. The parts were issued in blue paper covers with the bust of an Indian as the central portion of the pictorial design; the rear cover was filled with blurbs from New York and Philadelphia papers and a letter of commendation from Cass. I have seen such covers for nine of the ten numbers. The first three parts also carried "advertisements" of considerable interest, since in them Lewis discussed his plans and progress.³

There has been some question as to whether there might not have been letterpress with the first parts, but none has been found for the Philadelphia folios. In the second number, however, Lewis did announce that he was planning an eleventh, which would present "Historical and Biographical Description of the Indians" compiled from "notes taken by himself during his perambulations among them." This number was to be distributed gratis, but there is no evidence that it ever was published.

Each issue was to contain eight plates, and each was to sell at the subscription price of two dollars. It was long assumed that no more than nine parts ever were published, for seventy-two plates seemed

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all that could be located. Even such an authority as Frederick W. Hodge, in the introduction to his edition of Thomas L. McKenney and James Hall's *Indian Tribes of North America* (Edinburgh, 1933), doubted that the tenth part had been issued. I have recently, however, seen complete sets of eighty plates in the Clements Library at Ann Arbor, Michigan, and at the Indiana Historical Society; and I have been informed that two other complete sets of the work are known.

The copy of the *Aboriginal Port Folio* in the Minnesota Historical Society's library is valuable, even though incomplete. It lacks both covers and advertisements. Nevertheless, the society is fortunate to have all the plates of the first eight parts. These include three pictures other than portraits: the "View of the Great Treaty Held at Prairie du Chien" in 1825, showing soldiers and Indians in their places during an actual session; the "View of the Buttes des Morts Treaty Ground" in 1827, showing the commissioners arriving by boat (both of these "painted on the spot"); and the plate picturing a pipe dance and a tomahawk dance of the Chippewa. The other sixty-one plates are devoted with few exceptions to famous chiefs and warriors among the northern tribes, such as Keokuk, Black Hawk, Little Crow, and Wabasha. The order in which the plates appear in the Minnesota copy differs from that in the list given by Hodge on pages xxxviii-xli of his introduction to McKenney and Hall's book. It would, however, be difficult to determine the original order, and there would be no significant gain in



CHIEF *Little Crow, the Elder, as portrayed in Lewis' Port Folio*

so doing. It will suffice to say that the sequence by "eights" in the Minnesota copy agrees with the sequence of parts in the Hodge list.

Lacking from the Minnesota copy are the sixteen plates, numbered from 65 to 80, that comprise Parts 9 and 10 of the *Port Folio*. The following pictures were published as Part 9: "Sioux Chief," "Tensqua-ta-wa," "O-wan-ich-koh, or Little Elk," "At-te-conse," "Wa-kaun," "Jack-o-pa," "Wa-em-boesh-kaa," and "Wa-bin-de-ba, or the White Headed Eagle."

Part 10 has some unusual features which may explain why it was the last to be issued. It is possible that Lewis and his publisher had quarreled, for several of the plates are based upon the work of other artists. The first, number 73, is the "Interior of a Sioux Lodge" by Peter Rindisbacher. Number 76, "Abraham Quary, the Last Indian of the Nantucket Tribe, age 64," bears the notation "Sketched by Jerome Thompson at Nantucket, 1834, and presented to the publisher by Col. Joseph C. Hart of New York." The final picture, "Buffalo Hunt on the River Platte," was painted by T. R. Peale. All other plates in the section, "Kit-chee-waa-be-shas," "Maga-zee," "Na-ma-nis-cut," "Pa-she-nine, or the Good Marksman," and "A Chippeway Chief," carry Lewis' name.

¹ The author of this account contributed a detailed description of J. O. Lewis' "Indian Portraits" to *The Magazine Antiques* for May, 1947.

² In collaboration with James Hall, McKenney published an elaborately illustrated *History of the Indian Tribes of North America* from 1836 to 1844.

³ A copy of the *Port Folio* which includes blue paper covers for eight parts is owned by the St. Paul Public Library. Another copy, in the Hill Reference Library of St. Paul, lacks the covers but includes advertisements for Parts 2 and 3.



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