"His World Was Art"

DR. ANDREW FALKENSHIELD

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DR. ANDREW FALKENSHIELD, a resident of St. Paul for some 40 years, was a doctor of medicine, a photographer, and an artist of superior talent. A number of his photographic portraits of young people and cartes de visite, or card-size miniatures — some of them delicately tinted and vignetted — are in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society, as is an action scene of fire fighters at the corner of Fourth and Minnesota streets in downtown St. Paul. In the late 1850s or early 1860s Falkenshield is said to have made some remarkable silver-print portraits of such persons as the Dakota Indian Cut Nose, General Horatio Van Cleve, the Reverend Stephen R. Riggs, and Stephen A. Douglas. A composite photograph of Minnesota state officials in 1860, depicted with unusual artistry, is also attributed to Falkenshield. The individual pictures, in a star-shaped arrangement, reveal the youthful charm of some of the state’s officers that is in rare contrast to their better-known, more pompous poses of later years.¹

From his first days in the territory, Dr. Falkenshield was known as both artist and photographer. Oil paintings of early Minnesotans Old Bets (Aza-ya-man-ka-wan), a Dakota woman who was a familiar figure around St. Paul, Father Lucien Galtier from whose rude log chapel the city derived its name, and Henry C. Rogers, a Civil War officer and public official who served as Minnesota secretary of state from 1866 to 1870, were credited to Falkenshield, although only the Rogers painting actually bears his signature. It was perhaps not surprising that works attributed to Falkenshield were unsigned. Slow, painstaking, and uncompromising in his painting, he seemed to have been quite indifferent to public acclaim.²

¹ Mrs. White, whose articles have appeared in these pages and whose book, Ho! For the Gold Fields: Northern Overland Wagon Trains of the 1860s, was published by the MHS in 1966, is the editor and publisher of The Dalles Visitor in Taylors Falls.

² G. Hubert Smith, "First Photographers of Minnesota," 4, and "Andrew Falkenshield (Falkenskjold)," undated manuscripts in the G. Hubert Smith Papers, in the possession of Alan R. Woolworth. The author is indebted to colleagues on the historical society staff, especially Alan Woolworth, for assistance in tracing Falkenshield's career.

The oil paintings are in the MHS audio-visual library. See also Smith, "First Photographers," 4. Smith, former curator of the MHS museum and picture collections, attributed an oil painting of Harriet Bishop, the pioneer schoolteacher, to Falkenshield in "Andrew Falkenshield," Smith Papers.
Falkenshield was a Dane, a large, fine-looking, and friendly person. He was an enigmatic man who talked freely about his art but said little of his past. Word had it that he was of noble birth, a former surgeon in the Danish army or navy, a self-exile from his native land because of a disappointment in love. He was said to have practiced medicine and painted or studied painting in a number of places before reaching St. Paul in the mid-1850s.

Some of the rumors about him are now known to be true. Research in 1950 by the late G. Hubert Smith of the Minnesota Historical Society staff revealed that Falkenshield did belong to a noble family. A Danish genealogist traced the family back to 1631 and found the original name of Byssel had become Falkenskold (Falkenshield in English) in 1716. In that year two brothers, Martin and Christopher Byssel, Copenhagen merchants and officers in the Danish army, were made noblemen by the king and given the name. Andrew, a descendant of Martin Byssel Falkenskold, was born December 1, 1821, in Copenhagen. He was the sixth child of Anders Sehested Falkenskold, a major in the army, and Catharine Hedevig Leth Falkenskold, a member of the "noble family Leth."

Andrew was schooled at the University of Copenhagen and during the Schleswig-Holstein war with Germany (1849-50) served in the army as an assistant surgeon. Well educated and able to speak and read several languages, Falkenshield continued his studies after military service at the Almindeligt (General) Hospital in his native city. He received a medical degree in 1852 and the following year migrated to the United States. Nothing is known of the supposed disappointment in love which prompted him to leave Denmark.

One account of his life said that he went to Wisconsin, but no trace of him has been found there. While another story of his career indicated that he settled in New York City, practiced medicine, and began to study painting there, no record of a New York sojourn has been uncovered.

Rumor next put Falkenshield in Chicago where he was said to have done miniature paintings for the La Salle Street studio of photographer Alexander Hesler. It is suggested that at Hesler s gallery Falkenshield met St. Paul photographer Joel E. Whitney, who persuaded the talented Dane to move on to Minnesota. But Falkenshield's days in Chicago, like those in New York or Wisconsin, are not documented nor is the date of his departure for Minnesota.

He may have arrived in 1856. The photographic gallery owned by Whitney at Third and Cedar streets in St. Paul was operated that year by Moses C. Tuttle, a pioneer photographer and dealer in art and photographic goods. When Tuttle advertised in an 1856 business directory that he could furnish "Life-size photographs taken and colored by an experienced German artist," he may well have been referring to Falkenshield. The 1857 census correctly listed Falkenshield as a Danish artist living at Tuttle's address.

Three years later Tuttle had moved, but Falkenshield remained with Whitney at the corner of Third and Cedar. The census of that year showed young Whitney and the Dane living at the same boardinghouse. The Minnesota Farmer & Gardener, a short-lived agricultural magazine published in St. Paul, reported in 1861 that Whitney's studio was known to all Minnesotans of the day and that many a familiar countenance looked down from its walls. In addition to the portraits of notable Minnesotans and group photographs of public officials, the gallery exhibited beautiful views of state scenery. The article spoke of the columns, curtains, and balusters...
used as backgrounds for studio portraits and pointed out that the photographer was equipped with a special photographic plate that would hold as many as 64 pictures for producing the carte de visite, or calling card, so new and popular at the time. 7

Although Falkenshield was noted for his cartes de visite, he was not mentioned in the Farmer & Gardener article. It is clear, however, that he continued to work with Whitney until 1863. Sometime during that year he established his own gallery at 136 East Third Street. An advertisement for the studio states that Falkenshield "Will take all kinds of Pictures, Ambrotypes, Cartes de Visite, Pictures on Opal Glass, &c. &c." That he was no ordinary photographer is suggested in the advertisement, which continued: "Being a Painter he gives particular attention to copying and Enlarging pictures of any kind, and retouching them in India Ink or Painting them in Water Colors in a style sure to give satisfaction." 8

A STUDENT of Falken­shield's has left a rare view of the artist-photographer in his studio during 1863 and 1864. Elijah E. Edwards, former professor at Hamline University and a Methodist minister who was soon to become chaplain of the Seventh Minnesota Infantry regiment, studied art and photography with Falkenshield that winter. Later noted for his own oil paintings of St. Croix River scenes, Edwards credited the Dane with teaching him much of photography and art. He learned, for example, how to "manipulate plates in the wet colloidion process" by which Falkenshield produced photos­graphs that looked very much like daguerreotypes. Of fine quality, they were much prized and were, Edwards thought, "something the like of which we shall not see again." 9

Falkenshield's gallery, Edwards wrote, was frequented by an "aristocratic class of patrons, who valued artistic excellence in pictures." Among the visitors was an amateur photographer, clergyman, and budding novelist, Edward Eggleston. (Edwards later wondered why the writer had not made Falkenshield a character in one of his novels.) It must have been at this gallery, too, that Edwards met two visiting photographers and was persuaded to take them on guided excursions to the dalles of the St. Croix. 10

7 Minnesota Farmer & Gardener, 1:375 (December 18, 1861). Minnesota Manuscript Census Schedules, 1860, Ramsey County, 143.
8 St. Paul City Directory, 1863, p. 49, and 1864, p. 42. Falkenshield's advertisement is in the 1866 directory opposite p. 40.
10 Edwards, "Dies Boreales," 72, 76; Taylors Falls Reporter, August 1, 8, 1863. On Eggleston's interest in photography, see John T. Flanagan, "The Hoosier Schoolmaster in Minnesota," in Minnesota History, 18:362 (December, 1937). Edwards returned again in February to take photographs; Polk County (Wis.) Press, February 13, 1864. The photographers were John Carbutt and A. O. Moore.
According to Edwards, a Mrs. Newell was part owner of Falkenshield's gallery. It seems probable that she was Mary D. Newell, the wife of Frederick R. Newell, a grain dealer with whom she and their children are listed in the 1860 census. The 1864 city directory gives only Mrs. Mary Newell as living on Main Street between St. Peter and Market. Falkenshield lived in the same block. Edwards recorded that the Dane was fond of portraying a beautiful little daughter of Mrs. Newell with a tame spotted fawn he kept in the studio. "Sometimes the little girl was posed as sitting by the fawn, itself in a reclining attitude, with her arms around its neck, or her cheek pressed against its head." No other information about the lady or her daughter has been found, and the names of no other women are associated with Falkenshield's life in St. Paul. He was not a woman hater, said Edwards, yet while he portrayed women in his professional works, he seemed not in the least susceptible to the charms of womankind. His world was art, and on that subject alone he was willing to talk and share all he knew.

Falkenshield's studio also contained a large unframed mirror on which the artist grouped well-mounted specimens of wild ducks with living plants and lily pads around them. Sometimes he sifted a fine, white powder over the scene which dimmed the reflected images. It was, Edwards acknowledged, mere artistic play but was about as profitable as Falkenshield's portraiture.

As a photographer Falkenshield was not financially successful because he was slow in finishing work and because, according to Edwards, he lacked business ability. In 1873 he is said to have abandoned photography and devoted himself exclusively to painting in oils. In all the years of his St. Paul life there was one constant: his business address, whether as artist or photographer, changing in numbers only, continued to be Third Street.

11 Edwards, "Dies Boreales," 73, 75. The Newell family is in the Minnesota Manuscripts Census Schedules, 1860, Ramsey County, 154. The Newell daughters were Martha A., nine years old, and Agnes M., three, St. Paul City Directory, 42, 92. No other trace of this Newell family has been found unless Frederick R. is the same Frederick R. Newell who held early Unitarian services in St. Paul in October, 1858; Castle, History of St. Paul, 542.

12 Edwards, "Dies Boreales," 76.
In 1879 he seems to have combined art and photography again when he became associated with the photographic gallery of Charles A. Zimmerman. 13

ELIJAH EDWARDS saw Falkenshield once more in the mid-1880s after the artist had left Zimmerman. Edwards wrote:

I found him in my late visit more of a recluse than he was in the old photographing days, and living alone in a little den half full of unfinished pictures, and himself contentedly toiling and smoking unlimited tobacco. Age is beginning to tell on him, and still he has a striking figure, a somewhat heavy frame with broad shoulders and the arms of an athlete but with a somewhat lumbering gait not much unlike that of Dr. Samuel Johnson, but with a head more suggestive of Horace Greeley. In mental temperament he is more of a philosopher than poet, and is apparently happy enough in his seclusion [so] long as he can paint, but in this department of work he can never become distinguished as he lacks the boldness and dash necessary to attract the attention of a modern public, and he is too painfully conscientious as to the principles of his art. He will do absolutely nothing in the line of catering to popular applause, which he does not seem to care for in the least.

In his last years Falkenshield lived and worked at 54 East Third Street. From there he went to the city hospital where he died of diabetes in October, 1896, a few weeks before his 75th birthday. One biographical sketch of his life said that he was baptized in the Holy Trinity Church the day of his death. (The church may have been Holy Trinity Episcopal in Minneapolis, but church records for that period were destroyed by fire and no other information about the baptism or any funeral service for him has been found.) Arrangements for his burial in St. Paul's Oakland Cemetery were made by artist John A. Weide, who probably studied with Falkenshield. 14

In Weide's possession at the time of his own death in 1917 were a number of Falkenshield photographs, some of which are now in the MHS collections. Indeed, other than this small collection, no other examples of work attributed to Falkenshield have been found. The St. Paul Globe obituary remembered him especially for his miniature portraits which "have never been surpassed" and said that many of them were in St. Paul homes. 15

Perhaps other examples of Falkenshield's artistic work have been preserved by the descendants of old-time Minnesotans who cherish them for their excellence but may know nothing of the mysterious and talented Dane who created them.

13St. Paul City Directory, 1873, p. 177; 1874, p. 176; 1879-80, p. 186. On Zimmerman, see Jno. Land, Historical and Descriptive Review of the Industries of St. Paul, 1852-3, 120 (St. Paul, 1883); Upham and Dunlap, in Collections, 14:892. References in this and the following paragraph from Edwards, "Dies Boreales," 72, 74, are dated 1886, but his comments on this and other subjects give additional information which can only have been added to the journal after that year; Helen M. White, unpublished manuscript biography of Elijah E. Edwards, in the possession of the author.

14St. Paul city directories, 1890-96; St. Paul Globe, October 29, 1896. Fabritius to Smith, March 15, 1890, Smith Papers, gives the information about Falkenshield's baptism. In 1896 there were only two Holy Trinity churches in the Twin Cities; complete parish records for Holy Trinity Lutheran, in the possession of the church, contain no references to Falkenshield's baptism or funeral. An alphabetical index of burials in Oakland Cemetery offices indicates that Weide made arrangements for the artist's interment. On John Arndt Weide (1844-1917), music dealer, teacher, and artist, see St. Paul Dispatch, July 24, 1917, p. 10, and Minnesota History Bulletin, 2:279 (November, 1917).

15October 29, 1896.

ALL ILLUSTRATIONS used in this article are from the MHS audio-visual library.

FROM TIME to time readers of Minnesota History write to the editors with corrections, amendments, and not infrequently with suggestions for changing or bettering our coverage of the state's history. We like to hear, and we welcome especially ideas for improvement. One recent suggestion to which we would appreciate reader reaction is that the magazine carry — on an irregular basis as material dictates — one or two pages of "Communications" or "Letters from History Buffs." Such a section could serve as a forum for persons who have dug up some enlightening information or have formed an opinion on some points of Minnesota history which do not merit the time or space of a full-fledged article. It might also serve authors who wish to reply briefly to reviews of their books. We look forward to your response to this proposal — and to your "enlightening information."