A White House Connection

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ABOVE A FRENCH MARBLE mantel flanked by the collection of presidential porcelain in the China Room of the White House hangs the oil reproduced on this page. Like the one on the cover of this issue of Minnesota History, it was painted by Ferdinand Reichardt (1819–95), whose view of Independence Hall in Philadelphia is also part of the White House collection.¹

Reichardt’s river paintings, both the society’s and that of the White House, were executed only a year apart; the society’s Reichardt was done in 1857 and the White House version in 1858, the year Minnesota became the 32nd state. They are nearly identical in subject matter and composition, both depicting scenes on the Upper Mississippi River near Lake Pepin. Both illustrate the “fashionable tour” on that river, a familiar theme from Minnesota’s mid-19th-century history when steamboats cruised its waters carrying sightseers from various ports along its banks — sometimes as far away as New Orleans — to the Falls of St. Anthony. By the late 1850s the fashionable tour on the Mississippi was well established. With the completion in 1854 of rail lines between Chicago and Rock Island, the great river attracted an impressive array of travelers, including former president Millard Fillmore and historian George Bancroft in 1854 and the poet of Walden, Henry David Thoreau in 1861.²

While the railroad made the river more easily accessible, artists like Reichardt were playing a significant role in promoting it as a tourist attraction. American artist George Catlin, who traveled the river in 1835, coined the phrase, “fashionable tour,” and praised the trip from Rock Island to St. Anthony as one “capable of producing the greatest degree of pleasure.”³

¹ Mr. and Mrs. Donald C. Dayton of Minneapolis donated the painting to the White House in 1971.
³ Catlin, Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indian, 592 (Philadelphia, 1857).


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Catlin's claims were reinforced by the work of panoramaists who traveled the river painting what they saw on long canvases that, when unrolled before the viewer, produced a 19th-century equivalent of today's travel film. Artists visiting Minnesota, like Henry Lewis, who in 1848 painted a panorama some 1,200 yards long and 12 feet high, also produced many smaller works depicting scenes along the Mississippi. Lewis' numerous paintings of the Falls of St. Anthony, several of which are in the MHS and other local collections, exemplify the artists' fascination with the river.

Reichardt's paintings reveal his feeling for the romance of the Mississippi. His 1857 painting of the Falls of St. Anthony, also in the society's collections, is a brilliant representation of the cataract and the industry that was growing up around it; it is rendered in fine detail, remarkable in an oil of such a dynamic subject on a very small canvas. His success in depicting the cascade might be attributed to his considerable experience in painting Niagara Falls, a favorite subject for artists of the time. Reichardt's larger river boat paintings are leisurely in pace, pastoral in view, and illuminated by the diffused sunlight characteristic of a summer afternoon.

For all their evocative quality, Reichardt's White House and MHS sternwheeler paintings include an array of detail. From red curtains in the windows and smoke curling from the stacks to passengers standing behind ornate wooden railings, the scenes are recorded meticulously. The log raft that appears in the Washington oil contributes to the picturesque quality of the scene, but it also suggests some of the hazards of steamboating on the Mississippi, where traffic was heavy, and industry and natural obstacles such as sand bars sometimes disturbed the tranquility of tourist travel on the river. The two closely related paintings were probably executed in New York, where Reichardt worked from 1856 to 1859, but they were presumably based on sketches and material gathered from travel in the Mississippi Valley.


THE PAINTING on p. 249 is in the White House collection and is used with permission.