A TALE of TWO ARTISTS

Anna Mary Howitt’s Portrait of John Banvard

John Hanners

THE Minnesota Historical Society collections hold a variety of materials by and about John Banvard, painter of the Mississippi River. Small oil paintings, prints, and drawings are noteworthy parts of the society’s art collections. An important group of papers, including broadside notices, texts of his panorama showings, and an autobiographical memoir, makes the society’s manuscripts division an essential resource for the study of this artist and of the panoramas of the mid-19th century. MHS’s handsome oil portrait of John Banvard has for decades been the authoritative image of the adventurous young artist of the frontier. And for decades it has been accepted as Banvard’s own work. Cataloged and published as a self-portrait, the accomplished painting is more subtle in color and smooth in execution than other Banvard oils.

The simple reason for this stylistic difference was recently made clear by Banvard scholar John Hanners: the painting is not a self-portrait, but a portrait of Banvard by an English contemporary. In 1986 Professor Hanners, chairman of the communication arts and theater department at Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania, visited the Minnesota Historical Society to research his biography of Banvard; at this time he recognized the portrait as the work of Anna Mary Howitt. The following article elaborates Hanners’s findings and both gives credit where it is overdue and offers a glimpse of John Banvard in the company of his English contemporaries.

JOHN BANVARD (1815-91) had reached the pinnacle of an extraordinary career when he sat for his oil portrait by Anna Mary Howitt in 1849. Two years before he had been a penniless, itinerant American frontier artist. Now he was one of the wealthiest and most celebrated painters in the world. The English artist Anna Mary Howitt (1824-84), called Annie, was herself just beginning a promising career in painting and writing that would later give way to spiritualism and madness. How the two artists, so different in temperament and
training, crossed paths during those wintry February London days in 1849 is an interesting story.

Banvard, a New York City native, emigrated to Kentucky at the age of 15 after his father died and the family construction business collapsed. For years he wandered along the western river systems and operated crude showboats, painted theater scenery, and sketched portraits. Encouraged by the reception in St. Louis of some of his large landscapes, he decided to paint a moving panorama of the Mississippi River from St. Louis to New Orleans. Between 1842 and 1846 he floated down the river in a one-man skiff and, suffering numerous hardships and privations, produced thousands of preliminary sketches. He then settled in Louisville, rented a barn, and worked furiously to complete his mammoth project.

The result represented one of the great feats in the history of popular art. A quarter of a mile long and 12 feet high, the Panorama of the Mississippi, mechanically pulled along between two large upright cylinders, took America by storm. During 1847 and 1848 Banvard exhibited the painting first in Louisville to a demanding audience that was intimately acquainted with the scenes represented and then in Boston and New York. In Boston he added more river scenes and—now titled

Banvard’s Panorama of the Mississippi, Missouri, and Ohio Rivers—the painting and the artist's accompanying lectures on the scenery and geography of the region ran at Amory Hall for six months. By Banvard’s account it attracted 251,702 spectators. His profits were in excess of $50,000.

The work spawned dozens of imitations, and for several years panoramas of the American frontier dominated popular art. John Rowson Smith, Samuel Stockwell, Leon Pomarede, and Henry Lewis all produced western panoramas nearly as large as Banvard's. But his work remained the most popular and the most successful. Rather than being considered, as one modern critic has put it, a mere “folk painter of geographic newsreels,” Banvard was praised by his contemporaries as a contributor to the artistic, educational, and scientific knowledge of the American wilderness.

In the fall of 1848 the newly married Banvard set sail for England with his wife, Elizabeth Goodnow, who had been the piano accompanist for his Boston lectures. In London he rented and completely re-outfitted Egyptian Hall, a major exhibition center recently occupied by George Catlin and his famous Indian paintings. In the English capital the panorama and lectures found the same extraordinary success as they had in Boston and New York. The British, accustomed to accounts of the American West through the works of Frances Trollope, Charles Dickens, and others, welcomed the opportunity to study a living frontiersman artist and to view the vast expanses of the American wilderness. Opinions varied concerning the artistic merit of the Mississippi panorama, but the great majority of critics hailed it as a one-of-a-kind masterpiece. "It is a great work," commented the London Morning Advertiser, "which not only astonishes by its magnitude and grandeur, but is highly instructive and interesting."

Charles Dickens praised Banvard, declaring himself both pleased and interested in his work. Banvard also enthralled London audiences with his flat American drawl and humorous anecdotes. One notable dissenter, the notorious Victorian gossip Henry Crabbe Robinson, called the painting an "execrable daub of a picture. And the intense vulgarity of the Yankee explainer actually excited disgust." But Robinson's was a minority voice. Eventually 604,524 people paid to see the Mississippi panorama during its British exhibitions.

WE DO NOT KNOW how Banvard and Anna Mary Howitt met. The sitting was probably arranged by Francis Stephen Cary (1806–80), Annie's teacher and the director of the famous Bloomsbury Art School founded by Henry Sass. Cary is known to have "arranged sittings expressly for her."
and eldest child of the prolific writing team of William and Mary Howitt. The couple translated German, French, and Scandinavian literature and wrote fiction, poetry, biographies, travel books, and works for children. Young Annie grew up in a special household indeed. “Let us,” Mary once wrote her sister, “accustom our children to elegant objects as far as our means permit.” William Wordsworth sent Annie copies of his children’s poems for her approval when she was only seven years old. From 1840 until 1843 the family lived abroad in Germany because the Howitts considered Pestalozzi-inspired German educational methods superior to English models. The precocious 15-year-old Annie illustrated *Hymns and Fireside Verses* (1839), one of her parents’ most successful books. Her adult friends included Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti, John Ruskin, George Eliot, Charles Dickens, and other prominent Victorian artistic and literary figures.

In her early twenties Annie became involved with the influential group known as the Pre-Raphaelites. The Pre-Raphaelite “Brotherhood,” founded by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Millais, and William Holman Hunt, rejected the formal and unimaginative style of the Royal Academy school of painting, where a common practice consisted of copying old masters. They professed a “love for the primary hues,” typical of 14th- and 15th-century continental painters (hence the term pre-Raphael), and they infused their work with realistic subjects that were elevated to mysticism and religious symbolism.

A loose “sisterhood” grew up around the Pre-Raphaelites. Its membership included Christina Rossetti; Bessie Parkes Belloc, suffragist leader and mother of writer Hilaire Belloc; and Elizabeth Siddal, founder Rossetti’s wife and a “stunner”—a word coined by the Brotherhood especially to describe her. It was Elizabeth who encouraged Annie to take up painting as a serious profession. Rossetti himself painted in Annie’s studio at the home of her parents, and he was impressed by her talent. “She has painted a sunlight picture of *Margaret (Faust)* in a congenial wailing state, which is much better than I fancied she could paint,” he wrote his sister in 1853. “I am going down some time by daylight to give her some hints about the colour.”

Annie Howitt worked on Banvard’s portrait during February, 1849. The result is a somewhat idealized picture that captures Banvard’s soft eyes and sensitive mouth, that makes his ears slightly smaller and better formed, and that substitutes a thin, finely chiseled nose for Banvard’s larger one. The upward sweep of the painting suggests Banvard’s great height, variously listed by those who knew him as between six feet, four inches and six feet, eight and one-quarter inches. All in all, it is a fine portrait, technically well executed and a good representation of the aesthetic sensibilities of the Pre-Raphaelite painters.

ON February 22, 1849, during a sitting for the portrait in his apartment rooms, Banvard was called away to Buckingham Palace, where he was informed that Queen Victoria and Prince Albert wished for a private view of the Mississippi panorama at Windsor Castle during the Easter holidays. This performance, coupled with favorable notices from Dickens and the publicity of the British newspapers, ensured Banvard’s continued success. The artist also exhibited in the English provinces and in Paris for three years. Following a lengthy expedition up the Nile River and through the Holy

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Woodring, Victorian Samplers, 169, 171.

Autobiography, [25]; [Edith Banvard?], typewritten notes—both in Banvard Papers.
Land, Banvard returned home to America in 1852. He built a mansion—actually a smaller version of Windsor Castle—at Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island, and invested his now considerable wealth in the New York theater business. It turned out to be disastrous.  

His Mississippi panoramas (there were now two versions) and his other large paintings no longer drew audiences, and his income was greatly reduced. Surfeited with panoramas, the public shifted to the spectacular stage melodramas where panoramic techniques added a new realism to stage productions. Banvard recognized this shift, but his attempts at recapturing his audience failed. His massive Broadway productions, including a “bomb” that he wrote himself, Corinnia, A Tale of Sicily, ate away his fortune. After years of financial struggle and an intense but futile competition with showman P. T. Barnum and his Barnum’s Museum and Theatre, Banvard went completely broke. 

In 1883 he sold off his estate and possessions (but not the Howitt portrait) and settled in the frontier community of Watertown, South Dakota, to live with his two grown sons. There the artist spent his last years painting miniatures of his Mississippi panorama (several of which are in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society) and entertaining neighborhood children with stories of his remarkable exploits. He died of heart failure in 1891 and was buried in Watertown. The huge Mississippi panorama has disappeared without a trace.  

ANNA MARY HOWITT went on to illustrate her parents’ books, contribute articles to Dickens’s magazine, Household Words, and write poetry. But as early as her
acquaintance with Banvard showed signs of the mental instability that would plague her growth as a serious artist. It is conjectural, but Banvard may have inspired her to try her own hand at large-scale painting. She returned to Germany in 1850 to study under Wilhelm von Kaulbach, a painter famous for his gargantuan canvases on Biblical and mythical themes. In 1853 she submitted her first large painting, *Gretchen at the Fountain*, to the British Institution in London where it was promptly rejected. Later she managed a hanging for it at the Portland Gallery. That same year she published a lively best seller, *An Art Student in Munich*, about her experiences in Germany. This book secured her place as a minor but popular figure in Victorian literature.

In 1859 Annie Howitt outlined a "panoramic magnification" of the legendary Queen Boadicea. But she stopped when John Ruskin, that venerable arbiter of Victorian taste, coolly informed her that such a project was "beyond the tools of her experience." She also in 1859 married Alaric Alfred Watts, an eccentric and prominent leader of the English spiritualist movement. She then began a lifelong quest for the secrets of the spirit world, devoting herself to trance-induced spirit drawing and writing. Over the years she slipped into periodic bouts with insanity.

Some of her old Pre-Raphaelite friends were baffled by her mental instability and erratic behavior. Bessie Parkes Belloe thought her work "some of the most delicate, beautiful drawings ever done by a woman's hand." William Michael Rossetti, a perceptive critic, dined with her in December, 1870, and noted in his diary that she "does not now pursue art, except under the form of 'Spirit Drawings.'" Later he commented: "If only the spirits had let her alone, she would have drawn and painted very much better than she ever did under their inspiration." Eventually her spirit muses deserted her and she stopped painting altogether.

In 1879 Annie, now 55 years old, was described by friends as "cracked." One noted that she was a "mantle elderly lady with plenty of white hair, as pretty and vivacious—what people call bright—as ever... listening not so much to you as to the empty air." She died in the Austrian Tyrols in 1884, the same year that Banvard moved to South Dakota.

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THE OIL painting on p. 204, the gift of Edith Banvard, is in the MHS art collection. The illustration on p. 207 is from Description of Banvard's Pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Holy Land, [3] (1853); the broadside on this page is from the Banvard Papers, MHS.