1862: Before & Beyond

Wa-hpe-du-ta (Scarlet Leaf)

Wa-she-choon (Frenchman)

Toon-kau-e-cha-tag-ma-ne
(One Who Walks By His Grandfather)

Ma-ka'-ta I na'-zin
(One Who Stands On Earth)

MHS COLLECTIONS

If ever there was evidence that some of Minnesota's most historically important and iconic imagery can come in the most diminutive scale, it is the series of ten pen-and-ink portrait sketches by Robert Ormsby Sweeny. Measuring just 4-by-2.5 inches, these tiny portraits, now part of the Minnesota Historical Society's art collection, are among a handful of eyewitness visual records of the largest mass hanging in U.S. history: the execution of 38 Dakota men in Mankato on December 26, 1862.

Born in Philadelphia in 1831, Sweeny trained as a pharmacist and moved to St. Paul in 1852, becoming one of the city's first druggists. Along with artists Seth Eastman and Edwin Whitefield, he is among Minnesota's earliest and most prolific visual chroniclers. While Sweeny had no formal art training, he did have a restless nature—he seemed to go where the action was. After several months of sketching (and perhaps treating) Union soldiers in action on and off the Civil War battlefields of Arkansas and Missouri, Sweeny returned to Minnesota in August 1862 to recover from an eye injury. He would soon give witness to events of another kind in U.S. history.

Sweeny personally knew many of the Dakota men who were condemned to death. He traveled to Mankato and created these ten portraits on the morning of the hanging. Were they drawings of his friends, or was there only time enough to sketch these few? Examining these portraits, one can only wonder what the men were thinking on this fateful day: betrayal, pride, confusion, pain, sadness?

A century-and-a-half later, these ephemeral sketches are powerful reminders of the U.S–Dakota War of 1862 and the individuals swept away by its events.

—Brian Szott, acting head of collections

The U.S.–Dakota War of 1862 2012 marks the 150th anniversary of the U.S.–Dakota War of 1862, a tragic time in the history of Minnesota and the United States. Exploring the history of the war, its causes, and its aftermath are fundamental to understanding Minnesota today. Throughout 2012, the Minnesota Historical Society will introduce a wide range of initiatives and programs to encourage discussion and reflection.

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