Book Reviews


Last year saw the publication of two books concerned with visual representation in Brown County, Indiana—one from the Indiana Historical Society commemorating the work of an itinerant photographer in rural Van Buren Township during the years 1900–1940, and one from Indiana University Press surveying the coterie of artists based in the nearby town of Nashville during roughly the same time period. The coincidence of publication makes obvious the dichotomy between outsiders and insiders who made the original images. The artists from outside the county differed from the local picture-man in motive, method, and clientele. Taken together, these two books provide contrasts both informative and thought-provoking.

Born near Pike's Peak in Brown County in 1883, Otto Ping spent his youth doing farm work and traveling local circuits as a salesman, peddling pressure cookers and patent medicines. As a teenager Ping began to supplement his income by taking photographic portraits, using the plain style favored by itinerant painters in earlier generations. He also made mementos of special occasions such as baptisms, the laying-out of corpses, birthday parties, and family reunions. Ping followed this trade sporadically for forty years, adapting to changing technology until the need for such services faded away in the 1940s.

By the 1960s Otto Ping was operating a commercial poultry farm in the hamlet of Stone Head, also in Brown County, where he was visited by W. Douglas Hartley, an art professor at Illinois State University. Hartley was interviewing area residents as part of his research on a nineteenth-century stonecarver, published as The Search for Henry Cross by the Indiana Historical Society in 1966. The two men maintained their acquaintance, and not long before his death in 1975 Ping showed Hartley his old photographs.

Fifteen years later, in 1989, Hartley approached the Indiana Historical Society with a proposed magazine article about Otto Ping. During the same month, in what the Society's curator of visual collections Stephen J. Fletcher refers to as "a harmonic convergence," the Society's offices in Indianapolis were visited by Otto Ping's daughter, looking for advice about conserving her father's negatives. Before long Ping's descendants agreed to donate the col-
lection of three hundred glass and film negatives, as well as related paper documents, and a team of curators and writers got to work on the present book.

Otto Ping: Photographer of Brown County contains about eighty photographs with an introduction and comments on each image by W. Douglas Hartley. This material is supplemented by "Otto Ping and Itinerant Photography," a useful essay by art historian Anne E. Peterson, and by "Significant Beyond Intent," a conclusion by Fletcher. Design elements and quality of reproduction are impressive throughout. The photographs themselves are presented in complementary pairs, one per facing page, and are carefully selected to show the range of subjects in the Ping collection. Each negative is printed in a full-frame format, and not cropped as Ping would have done in finishing an enlargement. This disclosure of the periphery beyond the backdrop reveals more of the context of Ping's photographic efforts, often quite poignantly. As Stephen Fletcher points out in his remarks, Ping was not unusual as a turn-of-the-century itinerant, but he was singular to Brown County. For cultural historians interested in the larger region of the Upland South, this tribute to Ping's life and times repays close scrutiny.

Compared with Frank Hohenberger, the well-known newcomer to Brown County during the 1910s and 1920s, Otto Ping was not as encumbered with elaborate equipment, nor with the ideology of romantic pastoralism. Although there is some overlap in choice of subjects, the aesthetic effects of Hohenberger's photographs are strikingly dissimilar. Lyn Letsinger-Miller includes Frank Hohenberger in The Artists of Brown County, along with fifteen other individuals with professional studios in or near Nashville, and draws all but one of the illustrative photographs from the Hohenberger Collection at Bloomington's Lilly Library.

Letsinger-Miller approaches her topic as a storyteller, relying as much on oral history interviews as on research with primary documents. Her compendium offers to the public for the first time insights into the personal lives of the Brown County artists, allowing the reader to become lost in their intertwined experiences. Now that the long out-of-date tonal impressionism is becoming somewhat acceptable again in the fashions of the art world, the viewer may enjoy the beauty of the representative artworks without self-recrimination. The Artists of Brown County includes reproductions of seventy oil paintings and ten examples of woodblock prints, aquatints, watercolors, etchings, pastels, and pencil drawings.

Beyond her abilities as a writer Letsinger-Miller is obviously a talented organizer who has a gift for bringing people and resources together. Early in her project she entered into a collaboration with Rachel Perry, a curator at the T. C. Steele State Historic Site who recently put together the "Strokes of Genius" exhibition at the Indiana State Museum in Indianapolis. Perry contributed an admirable
introductory essay, "An American Art Colony," to the present volume in which she reviews the Brown County group as part of the social history of rural artist colonies in the United States. At a price of fifty dollars this book is a bargain for those who appreciate the attainments of the Brown County artists and wish to know more about their origins and destinies.

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The 478 generally long and substantial letters in this mammoth volume are from the collections of the New Harmony Workingmen’s Institute. They begin soon after William Maclure and Marie Duclos Fretageot first met in Paris and end with Madame Fretageot’s death, probably from cholera, in Mexico City shortly before her fiftieth birthday. Of the volume’s more than one thousand pages, some six hundred deal with the Indiana period between 1826, when Maclure and Fretageot were attracted to New Harmony by the excitement of Robert Owen’s social experiment, and 1832, when a much disillusioned and wearied Fretageot, who had been serving as agent for a long-departed Maclure, left the village. As befits two of the leading members of the famed “Boatload of Knowledge,” the letters constitute a treasury of insight and information about numerous subjects but especially about progressive education, contemporary science, and radical social thought as well as day-to-day life in New Harmony.

Of the two, Maclure is the more commanding figure. An unashamed egotist, he emerges as a highly opinionated individual utterly convinced that he has found the truths that would benefit all humankind. Combining a cynical view of human nature with confidence in the eventual triumph of man’s rationality over his short-sighted greed, Maclure placed his hopes in the overthrow of the “false education” of the past in favor of a Pestalozzian system of practical learning. Especially through work-oriented schools, the laboring classes of the world would eventually be empowered to overthrow the exploitative tyranny of a parasitic minority. Maclure intended to bring special benefit to women not only by advancing their claims to equality but by making them the leading participants in his system of education. He followed his dream through three distinct worlds: first Spain, then the United States, and finally Mexico. Of the three, he seemed to have the least confidence