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George Winter, Artist

The Catlin of Indiana

MANY times, to the knowledge of the present writer, a query has been made as to the fate of a certain large oil painting that once belonged to the State of Indiana, and was kept in the State House. The picture was that of the Tippecanoe battle ground, and was particularly valuable not only because of the importance of that battle and its prominence in the State history, but also because of its political and civil bearing on the commonwealth in subsequent days. Although the painting came to the State as a gift, the State did not think highly enough of it to guard it, and it has long since gone the way of all rubbish. One informant tells me the last time he saw this picture it was stowed obscurely away in a little room off the Supreme Court chamber, in the old State House. It was unframed, with canvas broken and lopped over. When the contents of the old Capitol were removed the painting seems to have disappeared for good. That is about all that is known of the treasure. Where the picture came from—who painted it—not one in hundreds, even among those who remember it, could tell; and yet that inquiry leads to a fund of interesting information.

In the newspapers of forty or fifty years ago one may find an occasional communication signed "George Winter," and as often a paragraph about this individual, whose name, except among the older residents of the locality where he lived, is now sunk in oblivion. From these fragmentary scraps one gathers that Mr. Winter was a pioneer artist of the Wabash Valley—honored as such in his day—and with tastes and interests that stimulate curiosity about the man and his work.

George Winter, the painter of the Tippecanoe picture, was well known in northern Indiana for nearly forty years. He can hardly be called the first professional painter of note in the State,

since Charles A. Lesueur and others of the New Harmony group antedate him, while Jacob Cox of Indianapolis was his contemporary. In a history of Indiana's art movement, Winter would take conspicuous rank among its beginners. The foundations for his work were laid in England, under favorable circumstances. Born at Portsea in 1810, of a cultured family, he lived in an art atmosphere from childhood. His talent was fostered and encouraged. After a preliminary course of private instruction he went to London, entered the Royal Academy, and lived and worked with artists for four years. When twenty years old he came to New York City. Seven years later—1837—found him at Logansport, and most of the remainder of his life was spent in the Wabash Valley.

After residing thirteen years in Logansport, he removed to Lafayette and lived there until 1873, when he went to California. In 1876 he returned to Lafayette, and soon after died of apoplexy while sitting in a public audience at the opera-house.

During these years Mr. Winter earned his livelihood with his brush, in a new country which was supposed to have very little appreciation of art—something of a mystery when we consider how meagerly our present artists fare in the midst of a more advanced culture. One of these latter who, when a young man, knew Winter, testifies to his business enterprise. Being an industrious painter he accumulated a great number of canvases, and once a year, about holiday time, would put them up at a "grand raffle." It proved a popular method. People who would not dream of paying a hundred dollars for a "mere picture," did not mind risking a dollar or two for a chance; and as a consequence, these raffles being well attended, art found its way to the walls of the people. Many of these pictures are now preserved in Lafayette, Logansport, Peru and other Wabash River towns. The late Judge Horace P. Biddle of Logansport had five of them which gave a fair idea of the character of those that caught the popular taste. They represent local scenes on Eel and Wabash rivers, the realism, in one or two instances, being modified with touches of fancy.

In a private letter written in 1841 and now in possession of the Wisconsin Historical Society, the artist speaks of six different

pictures of the Tippecanoe battle ground and of two of these as having a dimension of "152 square feet each." According to his description all were taken from different points of view, and, taken together, conveyed one idea not only of the battle ground, but of the "surrounding romantic country."

These pictures were painted in 1840, and the immediate incentive seems to have been the great Tippecanoe campaign of that year. There are indications, however, that this attempt to benefit by the fleeting public interest was hardly successful, for further on in the letter he writes:

"Although I have been defeated in getting these views before the public eye at the time when political excitement ran high, yet I have often indulged in the consoling hopes that Harrison would be elected, and that an interest would still be felt. * * * I think if I could get these pictures to Cincinnati some time before the General sets out for the White House * * * that it would be a favorable time to exhibit them. I have also thought that it would be a propitious time, too, either at the inauguration or during the spring to exhibit them at Washington."

Nothing, probably, ever came of these plans; the pictures have passed away from human knowledge, and of one only have we the meager record. This one was presented to the State and the State threw it away.

The most noteworthy and the most valuable work left by Mr. Winter was a collection pictures that was never sold by him. All are now in the possession of his daughter, Mrs. C. G. Ball of Lafayette. When he came to Logansport, in 1837, to quote his own statement, he was "allured to Indiana to be present at the councils held by Col. A. C. Pepper, at the village of Kee-waw-nay, in regard to the Pottawattomie immigration west of the Mississippi." He had an artist's romantic interest in the picturesque red man. What George Catlin was to the Indians in general George Winter was to the Pottawattomies and Miamis of the Wabash, and this rare collection, still preserved by Mrs. Ball, is the result. Presumably he valued them too highly to raffle them off miscellaneously, and the fortunate fact that the collection is still intact, together with much valuable manuscript matter, is

certainly one of which the State of Indiana ought to take advantage. They represent a phase of life on Indiana soil which has been little recorded, and no literary records could convey a more graphic idea of the present inhabitants' barbarian predecessors and their characteristics.

According to my careful count, there are nine oil paintings and thirty-eight water colors in the collection. Of the oils, four canvases are filled in with groups of heads, representing in all thirty-three Pottawattomie chiefs and women. One is a life-size head of Francis Godfroy, the last war chief of the Miamis, and another of Joseph Barron, the famous interpreter, who served General Harrison for eighteen years, and was an important personage in the Indian transactions of General Tipton and Abel C. Pepper.

The water colors are mostly of uniform size, the cards perhaps a foot square. The greater part of them are portraits with landscape backgrounds. They are beautiful color studies, the Indian costumes of that day, with their rich riot of hues and the finery furnished by the traders making rarely picturesque subjects. Some of these are of Indian chiefs, prominent in their day, but now lost to memory, while a number are of Indian women, belles of their tribes, gorgeously appareled. Several represent modes of burial, manner of traveling, etc., and two are of Frances Slocum, the white captive, whose strange story has been repeatedly published.

Along with this collection is a mass of manuscript matter which undoubtedly has a decided historic value, and which probably offers a more intimate description of the Wabash Indians than has been preserved elsewhere. Among these records a large number of folders of stiff paper are neatly bordered and carefully filled in with writing. This is a descriptive and biographical key to the water colors; the sheets correspond in size to the pictures, and the whole makes a large portfolio, which should certainly be procured and placed where the writers of our history can have access to them.—G. S. C.

NOTE—Since the above was written two interesting pictures by George Winter have been found. One, of the Tippecanoe battle-ground, is now being re-touched, and will probably come into possession of the State Library. The other, of William Digby, the founder of Lafayette, was rescued from a second-hand store in that city and will be hung in the Lafayette library building.