

## A Nineteenth Century Hoosier Artist Samuel Richards, 1853-1893

*Marguerite Hall Albjerg\**

The nineteenth century contemporaries of Samuel Richards accorded him first rank as a painter of pictures and also gave him an unchallengeable place in their affections. For this gentle Hoosier artist was talented and gifted both in working with inanimate canvas and in living with his fellows. Rarely has an artist in a forty-year life-span achieved such gratifying professional recognition as well as such satisfying human relationships.

Samuel Richards, the eldest of four sons, began life in 1853 at Spencer, Indiana, in the home of an able lawyer father and a gifted, imaginative mother. These four boys were left motherless at an early age but Sam always felt that he inherited his artistic talent from his maternal parent. In the picturesque hills of Owen County and in the region that is familiar to us as McCormick's State Park, this lad grew up and early reveled in the beauty about him as he tramped the river banks and the beautiful wooded slopes. At school age, he was trying to transfer to paper, blackboard, or wooden slab with charcoal, chalk, pencil, or penknife what he observed in nature as well as portraits of the people he saw about him. The making of these early though crude sketches quickened the lad's ardent desire to draw and paint and by the time he entered his teens, he had pledged himself unreservedly to pursue an artist's career. Unlike most youths' aspirations to be a fireman, a jockey, or a policeman, Sam's first ambition remained his life-long determination despite parental disapproval and a seriously impaired physique.

But his diversity of interests and his lack of funds led him, for a time, to explore his many capacities. He wrote some adolescent verses which he sent on to Henry W. Longfellow and received from the New England poet "a letter full of kindness but of gentle discouragement."<sup>1</sup> He taught him-

---

\* Mrs. Marguerite Hall Albjerg is a member of the faculty of the department of history, government and economics at Purdue University, Lafayette, Indiana. This paper was read at the Indiana History Teachers Association session at the Indiana History Conference on December 13, 1947, Indianapolis, Indiana.

<sup>1</sup> Louise Parks Richards Manuscript Collection, 35. This Manuscript Collection and the Samuel Richards Scrapbook are in the possession of the late Mrs. Samuel Richards' niece, Louise Parks Banes, Bakersfield, California.

self to play the violin with considerable efficiency—an accomplishment which caused the skeptical neighbors to become downright alarmed over the prospects of one who cared only to “daub in paint” and “fiddle.” He even ran off as a drummer boy to the Civil War and in his later years facetiously remarked that he was “a wounded veteran” of that conflict. Actually he was promptly returned home by a relative who soundly whipped him in route and, thereby, inflicted his so-called “wounds.”<sup>2</sup> Sam served as a bookkeeper in the general store and accumulated enough to purchase drawing materials and to provide for a year’s study in Indianapolis.

While this observant lad absorbed the beauty of the Owen County countryside, its bucolic life tutored him in the vagaries and virtues of small-town Hoosier folk. This early heritage he never forgot, for whether in Europe or America, he always possessed the ability to establish a delightful companionship with common folk whom he genuinely liked as well as a gracious comradeship with the intelligentsia whom he enjoyed. Actually, some of these early experiences were so indelibly impressed upon him that he sought to convey them to others, even when a small boy, by his remarkable gift of mimicry. He kept the lawyers and judge of the county court in an uproar by his imitations of their foibles. But it was the religious idiosyncracies of the local Methodists and Free Will Baptists who furnished him with an incomparable collection of stories. Strangely enough, the local inhabitants were never antagonized by these portrayals but always relished them as did his later companions whether in Munich or in Denver. For he was contemptuous neither of those he imitated nor of the frontier church under whose roof he witnessed so many amazing episodes. For his fun-loving spirit and his gift of mimicry as well as his contagious friendliness bound people to him wherever he lived. He was not only a matchless raconteur—he was also a gentle and affectionate man who loved his fellowmen even for their human weaknesses.

To young Richards, Communion Sunday on the frontier was invariably an interesting phenomenon. He noted that the good brethren and sisters approached the communion table with their pipes in their mouths and only when actually partaking of the Holy Sacrament were they removed. As the

---

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Richards Scrapbook, 13b, quoting the Indianapolis, Indiana, *News*, December 14, 1891.

bread and wine were swallowed, the pipes were promptly restored to their accustomed places.<sup>3</sup> One of these communicants was a kindly, energetic illiterate called "Governor Texas." He had a peculiar fascination for the boy. Though "Texas" was a devout Methodist, he generously helped the Baptists to save sinners during their revivals. But the close-union Baptists did not invite him to partake of the Lord's Supper—a slight he bitterly resented—so when in a conciliatory manner they called on him to lead in closing prayer, he boldly called out, "I can't work where I can't eat."<sup>4</sup>

Then too, there was Sister C. who was entirely unpredictable when she "got religion." Richards explained that, "Nature had dealt rather niggardly with this sister in the matter of mental endowment but she did not know it and never felt the inconvenience." But on one occasion when the religious frenzy had reached an unusual peak, she was not to be outdone by the "hallelujahs" of others but "in a spirit of sacrifice and utter abandon, rushed forward and drawing the set of false teeth from her month, deposited them on the altar."<sup>5</sup> Another devout sister was heard by Richards to offer this testimonial at prayer meeting: "For a long time I was vain and frivolous and sinful enough to wear jewelry. Finally, I concluded that the ear rings I wore were dragging my soul down to hell and so I took them right off and gave them to my sister."<sup>6</sup> Such youthful experiences not only supplied Richards with a repertory of stories but also filled his observant mind with an invaluable collection of varied faces and personalities.

Driven by a desperate eagerness to acquire knowledge in his chosen field, young Richards left Spencer in 1871. His sojourn there, however, had fortified him with a discerning appreciation of beauty, with a percocious understanding of human nature, with an ebullient and fun-loving spirit and, even with some meager savings. He spent over a year in Indianapolis where he worked under Theodore Leitz, a cultivated and kindly German photographer who had some knowledge of painting. The relationship of these two quickly developed into a warm and affectionate friendship and while Richards

---

<sup>3</sup> Louise Parks Richards Manuscript Collection, 23-24.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

learned something of color, the use of the brush and a great deal concerning the Old Masters and Europe's art galleries, his instruction in drawing and basic art principles was inadequate. Moreover, his artistic idealism revolted against the portrait painting in Indiana of the eighteen seventies. The photographer and not the artist played the stellar role in the process. "By means of a negative in a solar camera, the face or figure to be painted was thrown upon canvas, where, enlarged to life size, it was carefully traced with pencil . . . The tracings were covered with paint of various admixtures and blendings and then 'finished up' with *sittings* to approximate . . . the color of eyes and hair. This constituted a portrait from life."<sup>7</sup> Most local patrons were satisfied with their "genuine oil painting" if inspection revealed it had a canvas back, a painted front, and some similarity in feature to the face of the original. Such hack work did not please this artist-in-the-making but between these distasteful chores, he found time to draw and paint from life, study his few art books and read widely in the broadening areas of history and biography.

Late in 1872, he took a brief fling at formal education at Indiana University, but the weighty emphasis on algebraic theorems and Latin declensions was displeasing to his artistic mind. In fact, he found studying the faces and demeanor of his professors more interesting and profitable than heeding their erudition. An unwise investment in Indianapolis real estate deprived him of his savings and left him with a debt of eight hundred dollars, the paying of which plagued him for several years.

Richards was chafing at his inability to get artistic direction from experienced artists, so he wrote to the sculptor, Hiram Powers, who then resided in Italy and asked his advice. At that time, Powers was probably the best-known American artist abroad, and he generously took time to reply to this unknown Hoosier art student. He advised him against going to Europe but urged his studying anatomy and training his eye and hand to copy just what he saw so as to become an acute observer of nature.<sup>8</sup> "These suggestions were treasured with reverential regard" and as nearly as possible carefully followed. During this period, Richards produced his

---

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-46.

first pictures which won him favorable notice outside his Spencer clientele. They were a full length portrait of William Black, President of Butler College, and a smaller portrait of the Mayor of Indianapolis. These were exhibited at the Indiana State Fair in 1873 and, despite their location among the jellies and jams, fancy quilts and wax flowers, they attracted marked attention and added to the local prestige of the struggling artist.<sup>9</sup>

That autumn, Richards went to Franklin, Indiana, where he established a studio and remained for four years. His serious pursuit of his art won the prompt approval of the city's elders while his genial charm and amazing talent for mimicry captured immediately the younger crowd. The college fraternity of Phi Delta Theta made him a member, and wherever he went in his leisure time, the delighted response to his presence was evident. Romance did not pass him by. Shortly after his arrival, he was captivated by the very considerable charms of Louise Parks, a brilliant and rather dashing daughter of a prosperous but strait-laced Baptist minister. She had a mind as keen as her wit was bright and a heart as ardent as her will was determined. Their mutual devotion was matched by their joint determination to conquer parental opposition and to overcome poverty. The resourceful young lady explained the artist's frequent call to her disapproving father by saying they were "cultivating their minds" and studying the French Revolution. "When the denouement became known, and the unsanctioned engagement was announced to the family, the good man expressed his disgust by exclaiming: 'And you have been talking to me about the French Revolution. This is what I call an *American* Revolution.'" <sup>10</sup> As usually happens, however, the enthusiastic eagerness of youth overcame the stern opposition of maturity and an adoring but apprehensive father married them in 1875. Life took on a new lustre for Richards for now he had the companionship and devotion of a most attractive wife who believed implicitly in his rising star and who resolved to find ways and means for his study abroad. In 1876, their only son, Harlie, was born and his arrival added a new ecstasy to their exuberant happiness.

---

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 56; Samuel Richards Scrapbook, 17, quoting the *Terre Haute, Indiana, Express*, May 10, 1891.

<sup>10</sup> Louise Parks Richards Manuscript Collection, 65.

Richards having exhausted the portrait painting possibilities of the college town moved to Anderson, Indiana, where his now admiring father-in-law had given them a home. Shortly after their arrival, they were dealt a stunning blow by the sudden death of their year-old son who had never before been ill. "Summer complaint," as the malady was then called, was the pitiless assassin. One of the pallbearers on this sad occasion was a local newspaper man who had already formed a warm friendship with the stricken father. It was the first time this sensitive journalist had acted as a carrier of the dead, and he was much shaken by the experience and by the silent suffering of the young parents. Unable to express his sympathy by word, he wrote some verses dedicated to the child "loved and mourned by hearts so newly won."

#### HARLIE

Fold the little waxen hands  
Lightly. Let your warmest tears  
Speak regrets, but never fears,—  
Heaven understands!  
Let the sad heart, o'er the tomb,  
Lift again and burst in bloom  
Fragrant with a prayer as sweet  
As the lily at your feet.

Bend and kiss the folded eyes—  
They are only feigning sleep  
While their truant glances peep  
Into Paradise.  
See, the face, though cold and white,  
Holds a hint of some delight  
E'en with Death, whose finger-tips  
Rest upon the frozen lips.

When within the years to come,  
Vanished echoes live once more—  
Pattering footsteps on the floor,  
And the sounds of home,—  
Let your arms in fancy fold  
Little Harlie as of old—  
As of old and as he waits  
At the City's golden gates.<sup>11</sup>

These verses appeared in the town paper and were signed "R" which initial meant about as much as would the then unknown name of the author, James Whitcomb Riley.

<sup>11</sup> *The Complete Works of James Whitcomb Riley*, edited by Edmund H. Eitel (6 vols., Indianapolis, Indiana, 1913), I, 192.

The embryo poet and artist, each struggling for a livelihood and seeking recognition for his art, found mutual encouragement in their devoted friendship. Riley would say to his friend: "I wonder who'll get there first, Richards, you or I." Each was always elated over any recognition accorded the other. The artist sent for a set of wood carving tools so that he could carve illustrations out of box wood for the poet's "Farmer Whipple," "Wash Lowry's Reminiscences," and other of his poems as they came out in the *Anderson Democrat*. When Riley perpetrated his famous hoax regarding Edgar Allen Poe, it was his good friend Richards who supplied the necessary chirography. Riley contended that *what* a man wrote was not as important as the *name* over which it was written; that once a reputation was established, the public was ready to accept anything from the author. Richards, however, with his unwavering belief in the sincerity of men—even of critics—thought merit alone counted and that the favorable judgment of the critics had not only to be won but also held.<sup>12</sup>

To establish his thesis, Riley carefully imitated Poe's style in a poem which he called "Leonainie," and Richards after diligently studying lithographic facsimiles of Poe's handwriting, painstakingly copied it on the fly leaf of an old *Ainsworth Dictionary*. This volume was supposedly found in the possession of an elderly Hoosier whose grandfather had been the keeper of a Virginia tavern presumably frequented by Poe. The Anderson conspirators connived with the editor of the *Kokomo Dispatch* who first published the poem. The counterfeiting scheme was a tremendous success and the Eastern critics such as William Cullen Bryant and Edmund Clarence Stedman testified to the authenticity of the verses and of the chirography. Eventually the secret was out, Riley lost his job on the *Anderson Democrat* but not without considerable notoriety, a part of which ultimately proved advantageous to his literary career. Nine years later when writing to a friend concerning the affair, Riley said of Richards, "He did his work well, and was thus the author of the best part of the poem. He worked then as he works now;—straight from the heart."<sup>13</sup> After the "Leonainie" episode, the paths of these two Hoosiers went in divergent ways but their affectionate friendship

<sup>12</sup> Louise Parks Richards Manuscript Collection, 77.

<sup>13</sup> *The Complete Works of James Whitcomb Riley*, I, 432.

ended only with Richards' death. During the artist's early years in Munich, Riley wrote him enclosing a favorable review of his recent book, and added "The Top Literati of America is just now storming me with letters of congratulations. O, my man, our little old visionary speculations along the ragged river banks at Anderson are going to materialize after all!"<sup>14</sup>

In 1880, came the fruition of Richards' youthful planning. Financed by the prepayment of orders for pictures to be furnished later and also by the aid of devoted father-in-law, he and his wife set sail for Europe. Theodore C. Steele<sup>15</sup> sailed on the same vessel and these two Hoosiers studied together for a time at the Royal Academy of Munich. Richards planned to remain two years but stayed eleven for there in the shadow of the world's best art galleries and under the guidance of the ablest art teachers, he was artistically intoxicated by the opportunities to learn. He immediately entered the still-life drawing class of the Academy of Munich where he spent four years, though he could have entered the painting class at the end of two years. But he believed no one could paint well unless his foundation was laid well. Pronounced the finest draftsman among the six hundred students, he won a gold medal at the end of the drawing course. Other recognition came to him by way of a letter from John Ruskin who had heard of his work and asked that he might see his pictures. The artist sent some of his drawings to the famous English critic for his inspection. In his reply, Ruskin complimented Richards on the sureness of his drawing and on the patience it took to acquire such perfection in handling, but concluded in his characteristically trenchant manner, "I never saw beastlier or uglier models." The artist commented that, "The wrinkled old faces were perhaps not as pleasing as younger ones, but gave me a better opportunity for fine work."<sup>16</sup>

Richards attended lectures on anatomy for two years at the University of Munich medical school. He studied under

---

<sup>14</sup> Marcus Dickey, *The Maturity of James Whitcomb Riley* (Indianapolis, Indiana, 1922), 164.

<sup>15</sup> Steele was born in Owen County, Indiana, in 1847. In 1880, he went to Europe and became a pupil at the Royal Academy in Munich. There he studied under Benzur and von Loefftz.

<sup>16</sup> Samuel Richards Scrapbook, 24, quoting the *Denver, Colorado, Republican*, June 13, 1892.



Alexander Straehuber, Gyula Benczur, Nikolaus Gysis, and Ludwig von Loefftz.<sup>17</sup> The last named was later director of the Royal Academy at Munich and early became one of the most ardent admirers of Richards' work as well as his warm friend. Such notice from Professor von Loefftz was a wonderful boon for a rising American artist as the professor was recognized as one of Europe's best technical judges of painting. When Richards exhibited in the painting class, he was again awarded a gold medal. "He became a regular exhibitor at the Salon and the Kunst Verein, the latter being an incorporation of artists of Munich whose object was to maintain a high standard of excellence."<sup>18</sup> His "Little Italian Singing Boy" was the first original painting to bring him recognition and when it was exhibited, his professors told him he was destined to confer great honor on his country.<sup>19</sup> With foreign recognition came the friendly patronage of Senator and Mrs. John R. McPherson of New Jersey who purchased his "Peasant Stories" and hung it in their Washington home. This painting portrayed a bright interior scene where a large family was listening with enraptured appreciation to the legends graphically told by the master of the house. The expressions on the various faces were a study. The face of little Gretchen, the delicate and lovely daughter born to the Richards in Germany, appeared in this group as it did in several of his other pictures. When a visiting senator saw the painting in the McPherson home, he immediately offered his host four times the original price of the painting but was promptly refused.<sup>20</sup>

In 1883, Richards wrote his friend D. W. Campbell in Anderson, Indiana, and told him of the wonderful advantages

---

<sup>17</sup> Benczur, historical painter, was born at Nyiregjhaza, Hungary, in 1884. He studied at Munich and in 1880 became professor at the Academy. At a later date he became director of Pesth Academy. Gysis, history and genre painter, was born in Isle of Tinos, Greek Archipelago, in 1842. He was a pupil of the Munich Academy. In 1874, he settled in Munich. Von Loefftz, genre and landscape painter, was born in Darmstadt in 1845. He was a pupil of the Nuremberg Art School under August von Kreling and of Munich Academy under Wilhelm Diez. In 1874, he became assistant professor at the Academy and later professor. Straehuber, history painter, born at Mondsee, Salzkammergut, in 1814. He studied at the Munich Academy and later became professor and honorary member of the Academy.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Q. Burnet, *Art and Artists of Indiana* (New York, 1921), 149.

<sup>19</sup> Samuel Richards Scrapbook, 39, quoting the *Denver, Colorado, Republican*, December 1, 1893.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 16, quoting the *Terre Haute, Indiana, Gazette*, January 23, 1892.

he enjoyed in studying in Munich. He believed that German city had "the third gallery in the world in size and in quality ranks second, the first and best in the world being in Madrid, a city where there are no art academies or art advantages."<sup>21</sup> Richards made some excellent copies of works of the famous Spanish painter, Bartolomé E. Murillo, whom he greatly admired. Their workmanship was of such a superior quality that he was offered large sums for them, but he disposed of them at a very modest figure to his artist friends who also desired them and had esteemed them highly. This consideration for his comrades, even at the expense of his slender purse, was a lifelong characteristic of the man.

Early in their stay in Munich, Richards and his wife were taken in by the Anglo-American colony which was made up mainly of British and American artists, literati, and diplomats. In fact, Richards was soon regarded as the wit of the group and on festal occasions such as the fourth of July, he was often the central attraction. At one such function his sparkling wit and clever mimicry caused him to be cast as the chief minstrel for an entertainment given at an artists' carnival. The Prince Regent of Bavaria was present and was so carried away by the American funmakers that he asked that the program be repeated for his personal benefit.<sup>22</sup> Gifted in foreign languages, Richards quickly mastered the Bavarian dialects and loved to surprise the peasants with the richness of his brogue. When he wandered through the Bavarian Alps, he always wore the costume of the Bavarian Tyrol and adopted the manners and customs of the natives when among them. He knew many of their folk songs and "could jodel equal to any mountaineer Swiss or Tyrolese." He loved these simple, picturesque people, who returned his affection, and he always came back from a tour among them refreshed both in spirit and body.

Despite the relaxation of the Bavarian countryside, the artist's hours in his studio were necessarily long and arduous. By 1887, the dreaded disease which had probably gripped him—even if lightly—since he was in his teens, established its deadly hold upon him. Tuberculosis had already attacked his talented brother William as well as other members of his fam-

---

<sup>21</sup> Louise Parks Richards Manuscript Collection, 2a, 3a.

<sup>22</sup> Samuel Richards Scrapbook, 49, quoting the Denver, Colorado, *Rocky Mountain News*, December 18, 1894.

ily and had been always a constant menace to his frail physique. He went to Davos, Switzerland, in search of health and there found improvement while at the same time he made another devoted friend. His villa was next to that of the famous English art critic and historian, John Addington Symonds, who was an invalid also. Strangely enough, this highly cultivated and brilliant Oxonian and this one time obscure but talented Hoosier artist became intimate friends. The Italian government had just accorded Symonds the coveted honor of opening the private papers of Michelangelo on the four hundredth anniversary of his death—a privilege granted him because he was considered the greatest living authority on the Italian Renaissance. As Symonds examined these remarkable papers which he discussed with his artist neighbor, their companionship ripened and, during these interesting sessions, Richards made a sketch of his English friend. When Symonds saw it, he exclaimed: “‘You have seen and put in my face everything and more than I would have had the world see.’”<sup>23</sup> This arresting pen-and-ink head now hangs in the John Heron Art Institute, Indianapolis, Indiana.

Symonds told Mrs. Richards of the following incident which revealed the influence her husband had on this critic's thinking. One day while walking through a Florentine art gallery, the Englishman noticed a group of American tourists admiring one of the masterpieces. A member of the party was reading the estimate of the picture as given by the eminent critic, Symonds, who at the moment was one of the attentive listeners. Finally, he joined the group and introduced himself. Then he told them that as Americans they might be interested to know that his opinion of the picture had been changed since the writing of the criticism because of the influence of a most acute and gifted artist, their fellow countryman, Samuel Richards.<sup>24</sup> In 1893, Symonds published his definitive life of Michelangelo and in its preface, paid tribute again to the American artist. He said: “My friend Mr. Samuel Richards, the distinguished American painter, assisted me with technical and critical observations upon several intricate details of Michelangelo's work, and, furthermore, enabled me to give the right solution of the action intended in the co-

---

<sup>23</sup> Burnet, *Art and Artists of Indiana*, 152.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Richards Scrapbook, 37, quoting the Dayton, Ohio, *Journal*, May 9, 1893.

lossal statue of David at Florence.”<sup>25</sup> Previously, Symonds had said of Richards that he “is the most genuinely artistic genius I ever met, and is the coming man of his generation.”<sup>26</sup>

Richards was not only stimulated intellectually and artistically by his friendship with Symonds, but the latter’s twenty-five-year struggle with the same disease which gripped him increased his sanguine outlook. The artist said, “‘Symonds is my hope: he has lived to belie physicians’ prophecy; so will I.’”<sup>27</sup> So he did, but his borrowed time was a much briefer span for although Symonds preceded him in death by six months, he was in his fifty-fourth year while Richards died at forty.

One of Richards’ best works was “The Hour of Prayer,” which was painted in Munich in 1887 and which won a gold medal at the Academy. It shows the kneeling figure of a Capuchin monk at his evening devotions in the monastery chapel. An art critic notes that

It is precisely because the kneeling monk has been painted with intelligence and sympathy that the picture has awakened enthusiasm . . . [It shows] the struggle between the intellect and the soul in a man of a sanguine, nervous temperament who in a fit of enthusiasm became a monk when young, and who now, in middle age, longs for the glorious struggle of the world . . . There is the evidence not of sin but of struggle, and combat of the intellect with the soul, the desire of one to be freed from the domination of the other and to plunge into the myriad interests that make up the life of the world. It is a subtle conception, and it would warm the heart of Leibl [the greatest of the Munich painters of that period] to see it, though it is a flight beyond his own powers.<sup>28</sup>

“The Hour of Prayer” was exhibited at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1892, where it created much favorable comment and was later lent permanently to the New York Metropolitan Museum.

But Richards’ magnum opus was “Evangeline” which he first conceived when as a youth he read Longfellow’s poem by the same name. During the intervening years, he made thirty preliminary sketches before he actually began work on the picture in 1887. It portrays Evangeline finding her lover,

<sup>25</sup> John Addington Symonds, *The Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti* (2 vols., London, 1893), xxii.

<sup>26</sup> Samuel Richards Scrapbook, quoting the Cincinnati, Ohio, *Times Star*, June 22, 1891.

<sup>27</sup> Burnet, *Art and Artists of Indiana*, 153.

<sup>28</sup> Samuel Richards Scrapbook, 35.

Gabriel, in a Philadelphia almshouse after a twenty-five-year search for him from whom she was separated accidentally. Meanwhile, she had become a sister of mercy who was caring for the ill during a cholera epidemic in the midst of which she discovered her lover among its victims. The accidental meeting of these two in a sick room of a house for the poor is the motif of the painting. The canvas is fourteen by ten feet and has in addition to the two central figures, two other sisters of mercy and one patient. Many believed that Richards himself was the Gabriel of the picture.

The artist described his painting of the picture as follows:

My first idea of "Evangeline" came to me late one evening, just as I had finished reading the poem, some fourteen or fifteen years ago . . . . I tried then to make a charcoal sketch, but failed . . . for lack of knowledge of the principles upon which pictures are composed . . . .

After completing my studies at the Academy of Munich . . . I was determined at last to paint my picture and stake my all upon it . . . . I had painted many pictures previous to this, which had given me confidence to attempt such a canvas.

After a long, anxious period during which I had worked by day with my brush and by night with my brain, the picture was about finished . . . when suddenly, without warning, I was taken with violent hemorrhage of the lungs. After some weeks I was carried to my studio in a chair until I completed the few minor details. The result I leave to others, claiming only in all sincerity to have made a conscientious effort to perpetuate a noble and pure sentiment and an honesty of endeavor for sound technical execution, which, taken together, is my ideal of art . . . .

Without wishing to raise the question of "nationality" in art, believing as I do that art in its highest form is universal, yet one must admit that every nation has imprinted its individuality upon art in each country, from the Greek to the Modern French. We have little or no art that can be called national in character. But the time is here when every American should begin to hope that native artists, whether living abroad or at home, would endeavor to begin the foundation at least of the art of the coming greatest nation in the world.

To me, the life, traditions and legends of my native land teem with subjects as beautiful and noble in thought as one could find upon earth, so I have worked and hoped to draw materials from my own land for my life work . . . . The story of Evangeline gave me a congenial motive from my own country and my next aim was its proper presentation . . . .

I expected criticism on two or three points at least . . . . In the first place, the picture is lighted from behind. The light is diffused through the curtained windows in the back instead, of falling from the side or front, the subject being a romance from real life, demanded picturesque and poetic effect, which I found far more strongly obtained

by letting the light come from behind. Another important reason for this, it afforded me a legitimate way to shield Evangeline's age as compared with Gabriel . . . [who was] prematurely aged through hardships and disease, and now, wasted by the plague and in dying condition . . . To present the ideal Evangeline was of far more moment to me than to satisfy "contentious realism" . . . *My* Evangeline I loved so well that I fain would shield her . . . from the full glare of light which might reveal the lines of age and suffering.<sup>29</sup>

During the two years that it took to complete the picture, Richards' studio was closed to all except his wife and his models. After his collapse, only two weeks before the painting's completion, the doctors said he could not live, but he whispered, "I will show the doctors—I will live." Seeing his frenzied eagerness to complete the picture, his physicians agreed after he had had a two months' rest that it would do him less harm to be carried to his studio where sustained by egg-nogs and stimulants, he was allowed to paint for two hours daily. After six weeks of such tragically heroic effort, his painting was finished, but he collapsed and was taken away to Davos, Switzerland, in a desperate effort to halt the ravages of a fatal disease.

"Evangeline" was first exhibited alone in Munich in 1889 and, while customarily such a showing lasted only a month, crowds flocked to see it for three months. It was an immediate success both with the public and with the critics and was exhibited at the Paris Exhibition later the same year. Professor von Loefftz said of it, "I have not a single criticism to offer. It is absolutely perfect."<sup>30</sup> A professor of Art History and Criticism called it, "the greatest picture of American art which I have seen . . . At the last exhibition of the Royal Academy, London, I saw many interesting and charming pictures, but nothing in which the depths of the human soul were expressed with such truth and power as in these works of Samuel Richards."<sup>31</sup> The *Indianapolis Sentinel* referred to it as, "One of the most famous pictures ever done by an American artist" while the *Indianapolis News* spoke accurately when it said, "There is a peculiar pathos in the history of this picture. The artist gave it *his* strength, *his* spirit, almost *his* life."<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16, quoting the *Detroit, Michigan, Journal*, January 9, 1892.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 8, quoting the *Cincinnati, Ohio, Times Star*, June 22, 1891.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

When Richards returned to the United States in 1891, "Evangeline" was purchased by the Honorable Bela Hubbard, a Detroit connoisseur of art, and was presented to the local museum. This Hoosier artist—for he was always proud of his Hoosier birth as well as his American heritage—felt some regret that his most famous picture did not find its permanent home in his native state. During a showing of the painting in Detroit, the artist was unobtrusively moving about the museum and enjoying some of the originals of the old masters. He met by chance a rather pompous gentleman just returned from Europe who considered himself an authority on art and who patronizingly remarked to Richards, "I am delighted . . . to find so many copies of the Old Masters here in Detroit."

"Oh, I beg your pardon," answered Richards, "but these are genuine."

"Oh not at all, impossible, you know for I have seen the original of this and this and this," and he pointed to the grand Murillo and others in rapid succession and named various galleries as the places of their abode.

"And you saw the original of this, too," innocently inquired Richards as he indicated "Evangeline."

"Oh yes, yes, indeed; but I cannot recall just where now, you know. Very admirable copy though, very."<sup>33</sup> Richards modestly concealed his own identity and thoroughly enjoyed the incident, as did his friends later when he related the story to them in his inimitable way.

In his painting, Richards said he always planned the general design of his picture and then looked about him for subjects suitable for models. He painted his faces and figures from sittings, but relied on his own imagination for idealizing the expressions of some of the countenances.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, while his charcoal and pen-and-ink heads were also made from models, there was never any preliminary sketching of any kind for these portraits. He pointed out that he had striven hard to avoid confining himself to one line of subjects. "This is so easy," he said, "that it requires an effort to keep from falling into the habit unconsciously. I have taken a new problem to solve each time and I believe my reputation

---

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 13, quoting the Detroit, Michigan, *Tribune*, October 25, 1891.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 17, quoting the Terre Haute, Indiana, *Gazette*, January 23, 1892.

will be the better for it."<sup>35</sup> The wide variety of his artistic themes substantiate his statement.

In analyzing Richards' artistic style, Edward Garezynski, an art critic, placed him in the naturalistic school and indicated that like Leibl he comprehended

naturalism as realism plus sympathy and suggestiveness . . . Richards in his technique is absolutely original. He swallowed and digested all that Munich could teach him and added to that fund of information very much that comes from his own brains and from the intelligent study of the old masters, chiefly, I think, the second Flemish School and the great Spaniards. The Italians have evidently impressed him but little, because of their conventionality . . . Nothing is more striking in his painting than the grand sobriety of his tones, for he uses but few pigments, and these of a kind upon which time can work no change.<sup>36</sup>

Thomas Moran, an American artist of note who was a contemporary of Richards, said of him, "He has no superior in America and few in Europe."<sup>37</sup> His professors at the Royal Academy said that no other American had ever been to Munich who gave such promise as he.<sup>38</sup>

There were other evidences of Indiana's coming of age in the artistic world. The observations of Professor Frank B. Sanborn of Massachusetts who visited Indiana during Richards' return trip, appeared in the *Boston Advertiser*. After commenting on the huge quantity and amazing uses of Indiana's natural gas, he added,

Art advances in Indiana today as fast as in Boston, though it has not yet got so far. I met at a tea table in Anderson an Indiana painter who was lately returned from Europe where he has been studying and painting in Munich, Florence and Rome, and where his most intimate friend of late has been Addington Symonds, the English scholar and poet . . . It was odd to hear the latest discoveries about the great Florentine artist [Michelangelo] at a tea table in the "natural gas belt" of Indiana—but why not? Civilization migrates and expands and if there are deserts and barbarians where once were the splendors of Egyptian and Greek cities, why should there not be splendid cities where lately there were barbarians hunting racoons in the wilderness?<sup>39</sup>

So it would seem that even the Boston Brahmins saw hope for culture in the Hoosier state which had so recently emerged from its unlettered savagery.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 52, quoting the Indianapolis, Indiana, *Journal*, May 5, 1895.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.



Richards lived nearly four years after the completion of his most famous work and painted several additional pictures. One of these was, "Day Before the Wedding" which he painted at Davos, Switzerland. He regarded it as "technically more meritorious" than "Evangeline." It portrayed a beautiful young maiden adorning her bridal costume with orange blossoms while her thoughtful lover sat by and watched her appreciatively. Shortly before his death, Richards sketched plans for a huge canvas which he designated as "Lincoln's Last Call for Troops." It would have included about three hundred figures and would have shown a regiment in the process of organizing.<sup>40</sup>

The story of Richards' success preceded his return to the United States but did not prevent his landing in jail on his arrival in New York. His wife and young daughter had preceded him to America and when he came some weeks later, he brought with him two trunks of their clothes. Since he arrived with feminine apparel and unaccompanied by female companions, he was suspected of a first-class smuggling job and, therefore, was arrested and thrown into jail.<sup>41</sup> But his unflinching sense of humor enabled him to laugh at this indignity even in his weakened condition, and he delighted his friends with a hilarious account of the episode. As a matter of fact, his home-coming would have been a triumphal tour had he had the health to participate in the gala events in his honor at different art centers as well as enjoy the lavish hospitality of his old friends and of his new admirers.

"Evangeline" was exhibited in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Dayton, Detroit, Chicago, and Indianapolis. Orders for pictures fairly swamped him while offers of positions from art academies were numerous. Leland Stanford University invited him to be head of their art department. The most flattering invitation, however, was that from the Boston Art School which offered him its directorship, a large salary, whatever time he desired for his own painting, the privilege of selecting his corps of teachers, and any amount of money necessary to make the school the first of its kind in the world. In the artist's own words, "Victory stood at the door with full hands." Yet this painter with the gentle

---

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 13b, quoting the Indianapolis, Indiana, *News*, December 24, 1891.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 9, quoting the Detroit, Michigan, *Tribune*, October 11, 1891.

soul and valiant spirit was untouched by bitterness or frustration as he declined these honors one by one. For courageously determined as was his struggle to live, philosophically serene was his imperturbable contemplation of death. He had achieved not only mastery in the complex art of painting but also mastery in the even more complicated art of living. This made his life both an inspiration and a benediction to those who knew him.

Richards settled in Denver where he might have the medical care of his devoted friend and former physician, Carl Ruedi, who for years had been the leading doctor at Davos, Switzerland. For a brief period, Richards was director of the Denver Art League but declining strength necessitated the resigning of this post. He lived in his tent house and between frequent periods of rest, he continued to paint, directed an art class of young ladies, and occasionally received callers. A short time before his death, two old friends—James Whitcomb Riley and Reverend Myron Reed—spent the afternoon with him. When they left in the gathering twilight after a delightful visit, he called out to them “Good night, old friends, good night—for there is no good-by.”<sup>42</sup> After his death on November 30, 1893, Riley sent to Mrs. Richards the following sonnet in memory of his “master friend:”

AT HIS WINTRY TENT

Not only master of his art was he,  
 But master of his spirit—winged indeed  
 For lordliest height, yet poised for lowliest need  
 Of those, alas! upheld less buoyantly.  
 He gloried even in adversity,  
 And won his Country's plaudits, and the meed  
 Of old world praise, as one loathe to succeed  
 While others were denied like victory.  
 Though passed, I count him still my master-friend,  
 Invincible, as through his mortal flight,  
 The laughing light of faith still in his eye  
 As, at his wintry tent, pitched at the end  
 Of life, he gaily called to me “Good night,  
 Old friend, good night—for there is no goodbye.”<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Burnet, *Art and Artists of Indiana*, 155.

<sup>43</sup> *The Complete Works of James Whitcomb Riley*, IV, 274.