

Lonely Swiss Artist Roved Dakota In '40's In Quest Of Beauty

No. 3 in a series on the development of the tradition of the indigeneous art of the Middle Border region.

A drab government publication is not the place one would expect to find a poignant story of an artist braving travel hardships of the West a century ago in quest of abstract beauty. But the "Journal of Rudolph Friederich Kurz" (U. S. Government Printing Office, 1937,) a copy of which is in the Friends of the Middle Border Collection of Regional literature, provides just such a tale.

Kurz was a young Swiss who, while studying art in Paris, became obsessed with a desire to catch on canvas the evanescent lines of abstract esthetics. The ancient Greeks, he thought, had come close to this with sculpture because they worked from the human form, untrammelled by the conventions of civilization. To secure similiar subjects he decided to seek the Indians of the New World. The Mexican War was in progress in 1846, so he was diverted to the Upper Missouri Valley, where he lived until 1852 when he returned to Switzerland.

Artist had 'Tough Time.'

"The artist had what we would call a tough time of it," declares Dr. James A. Van Kirk, Supervising Director of FMB, "Nearsighted and speaking with a German accent, he was referred to as 'The Dutchman' by rough westerners. They not unnaturally thought him 'queer' because he was more interested in painting Indians than in cheating them out of valuable furs."

Kurz poured out his heart into his journal, recording frankly his observations on the shabby treatment he received, the customs of mountain men, fur traders, Mormons, Indians, and others whom he met. Quite naively he reports how, when threatened by Indians, he insisted upon picking up his scattered pencils and sketch books. Once he provoked his guide to desperation by loitering to draw the graceful curves of an antelope's antlers.

Lived at Old Ft. Pierre

Indian dances, costumes, bull boats (coracles made of raw buffalo hides), ponies, or even the graceful design of moss on a stone, interested him. He spent much time at Fort Pierre across the river from South Dakota's capital, and at Ft. Union on the North Dakota-Montana boundary. Wherever he went, he confided his innermost thoughts to his diary; and what he saw, to his sketchbook.

Back in Switzerland, he failed to win the acclaim he had expected and settled down as an obscure teacher in an academy at Berne, dying there in 1871. His diary and his sketches gathered dust for many years, finally coming to the attention of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington which, in 1937, issued a translation of the journal copiously illustrated by plates.

F M B Has Tinted Prints

The following photographic copies of his sketches, colored by Miss Frances Fuller of San Francisco, have been presented to FMB's Dakota Galleries:

Kurz Himself (from a finished painting); Bull Boats, Fort Berthold, N. D., July 13, 1851; Bags of Crow Indians and Iowa Maidens; and

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Packhorse; Mandan Horseman, August 23, 1851; Crow Saddle, October 5, 1850; Returning from the Dobies Ball, Fort Pierre, July 4, 1851; Horse Guard of Fort Berthold, (N. D.); Fur Trader and Engagees (French-Canadian employees), August 28, 1851; Packet Boat 'St. Ange' on Missouri, August, 7, 1851, Californians; Council Bluffs (in the distance) May 18, 1851

Here with pictures by George Catlin (American Artist, 1796-1872), and Karl Bodmer (1809-1893), who accompanied Prince Maximilian of Wied on a scientific exploration up the Missouri, these sketches take their place as examples of early Middle Border art.

"Kurz was not a great artist," says Dr. Van Kirk. "But with a deadly sincerity he "followed the gleam to a rough and alien land, and with fidelity to his ideal attempted to capture esthetic highlights of a crude life."

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