

Alfred Thompson Bricher's Early Minnesota Scenes

Rena Neumann Coen

IN THE EARLY SUMMER of 1866, a young painter, responding to the call of adventure and in quest of novel subjects for his brush, embarked on a leisurely sketching expedition to the upper reaches of the Mississippi River. Named Alfred Thompson Bricher (1837–1908), he was relatively unknown at the time. But this Newburyport, Massachusetts, artist was soon to establish himself in a Boston studio as a master portrayer of the American scene.

Bricher's tour up the Mississippi River to the new state of Minnesota may well have been stimulated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Song of Hiawatha," published in 1855, which immediately and profoundly captured the public imagination. This popular idyll of the mid-nineteenth century extolled the simple life of the Indians of the upper Midwest and, for the first time, incorporated their legends in a serious poetic work. It

¹Rossiter's only known Minnesota painting, "Minnesota Prairie," undoubtedly done during the artist's western trip of 1858–59, is not a picture of one of the usual tourist landmarks but of the gently rolling farmlands of the pioneer homesteaders. See correspondence between Edith Rossiter-Bevan and Edgar P. Richardson in the Detroit Institute of Arts, microfilm copy in Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C. In a letter of June 12, 1956, Mrs. Bevan writes that Rossiter exhibited in Milwaukee in 1858 — "why, I can't imagine. I have seen a landscape he did — called *Minnesota Prairie*." This landscape, which was owned by Kennedy Galleries in New York City in 1956, is now in the collection of the University of Minnesota Gallery. On other artists, see Rena Coen, *Painting and Sculpture in Minnesota, 1820–1914*, 32–50 (Minneapolis, 1976).

THIS VIEW OF "Lake Pepin, Mississippi River," is an engraving by Robert Hinshelwood of an Albert Bricher painting. The location of the original is unknown. The engraving is in the MHS audio-visual library.

also celebrated the unspoiled beauty of the area's lakes and woodlands, its clear streams, and sparkling waterfalls. Though white settlement had already begun and was well established by the 1850s and 1860s, Minnesota was still a land of virgin stands of pine and birch, of open prairie, and wide and silent rivers. It was, moreover, a tourist attraction of increasing importance, luring artists as well as travelers of other talents to such scenic landmarks as Lake Pepin, Maiden Rock, and Minnehaha Falls. John Frederick Kensett, Eastman Johnson, Frank B. Mayer, Albert Bierstadt, George F. Fuller, Robert S. Duncanson, and Thomas P. Rossiter were among the itinerant artists sketching and painting in Minnesota during the earliest decades of its statehood. By and large these and other more obscure artists who made such a tour of pioneer Minnesota and the upper Mississippi River were young and still relatively unknown, indulging perhaps in a western fling before settling down to the more serious business of life in the studios of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia.¹

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Bricher's trip up the mighty "Father of Waters" was probably made in the comfort of a Mississippi River steamboat, whose slow but often luxurious journey was a fashionable adventure in the nineteenth century. As early as 1835, George Catlin, the well-known painter of the American West, had recommended such a steamboat tour as a sightseer's paradise, pointing out that it was the only part of the great "'Far West' . . . to which ladies can have access." He described his own trip up the "majestic river" from the "mouth of the Ouisconsin to the Fall of St. Anthony" as having filled his "high-wrought mind . . . [with] amazement and wonder," and he proposed a "Fashionable Tour" by steamer to Rock Island, Galena, Dubuque, Prairie du Chien, Lake Pepin, the St. Peter's (Minnesota River) and the Falls of St. Anthony.² That Bricher was one of those who followed Catlin's advice can be inferred from a drawing that the artist dated June 2, 1866, showing a typical Mississippi River side-wheeler tied to a dock beneath the cliffs at Dubuque, Iowa, an embarkation point for the river voyage to St. Paul.³

Though we do not know whether Bricher actually reached St. Paul, he did get fairly close to it, sketching on the way near La Crosse, Wisconsin, at Lake Pepin, and at Red Wing, Minnesota. Lake Pepin is a widening of the Mississippi River just north of the city of Winona. It bears, in fact, an interesting resemblance to the widening of the Hudson River at Tappan Zee. The similarity of these two scenic areas is significant when one considers that the Tappan Zee, between Tarrytown and Nyack, New York, forms the southern boundary of the Catskill Mountain highlands, the area most favored by the artists of the Hudson River School. These celebrators of the American scene occupy a central place in our national art history, for they voiced the new pride of the American people in their native land. Indeed, the Hudson River artists attached a moral as well as an aesthetic value to the American landscape, for they saw in its unspoiled

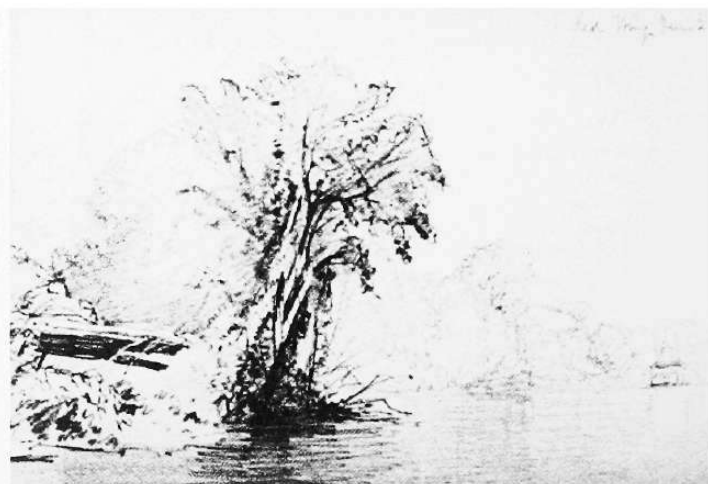
beauty a "sublime" manifestation of primitive nature, far removed from the European scene tainted by its association with morally decadent societies. As many second- and third-generation artists of this Hudson River tradition traveled west, they carried with them, consciously or not, this essentially Rousseauian vision of a new world utopia.⁴

It is in precisely these terms, in fact, that customers were solicited and a western steamboat voyage touted in an article that was first published in the *Chicago Railroad Gazette* on June 9, 1866, and subsequently reprinted that summer in at least one Minnesota newspaper. Under the heading, "A DELIGHTFUL SUMMER TRIP — RAPTURE FOR THE TOURIST, HEALTH FOR THE INVALID AND COMFORT FOR ALL," it began by admonishing the public that "The summer tourist or pleasure seeker who fails to visit the upper Mississippi country, is guilty of an oversight which a lifetime may not repair." It then went on to detail the unfolding of a "panorama of beauty and sublimity which the Hudson cannot equal, nor the 'castellated Rhine' surpass." With typical nineteenth-century hyperbole,

²See Theodore C. Blegen, "The 'Fashionable Tour' on the Upper Mississippi," in *Minnesota History*, 20:377-396 (December, 1939). The essay was reprinted in Blegen's *Grass Roots History*, 121-134 (Minneapolis, 1947). See also, George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians*, 2:590-592 (Philadelphia, 1857).

³The drawing is reproduced in Jeffrey Brown, *Alfred Thompson Bricher, 1837-1908*, 17 (Indianapolis, 1973). This was the catalog for the 1973 Bricher exhibition at the Indianapolis Museum of Art. The author wishes to acknowledge here the generous help of Brown in providing information and photographs in the preparation of this article.

⁴For information on the Hudson River School, see Barbara Novak, *American Painting of the 19th Century* (New York, 1969), and Clara Endicott Sears, *Highlights Among the Hudson River Artists* (Boston, 1947).





the advertisement dwelt particularly on the "famous bluffs [that] . . . line the river to St. Paul, 'rising' abruptly from the water's edge," and gradually increasing in height, "reaching their loftiest altitude near Lake Pepin." The bluffs, reported the article, "present to the traveler as he floats swiftly yet dreamily up the current, a constant series of ever changing views full of grandeur and beauty. Their summits, mostly bare of foliage give the assurance that just as they brave the storms of the present, so, the same in form and appearance, they breasted them a thousand years ago."⁵

Perhaps in response to such blandishments, or perhaps simply from a youthful fascination with the frontier

AN EXAMPLE of Bricher's mature work as a landscape artist is "Morning at Grand Manan," 1878, an oil on canvas reproduced through courtesy of the Indianapolis Museum of Art, Martha Delzell Memorial Fund. Grand Manan, part of New Brunswick, is located at the entrance to the Bay of Fundy.

west and its promise of "beauty and grandeur," Bricher traveled slowly up the Mississippi River through Iowa and Wisconsin in June, 1866. By Friday, June 22, he had reached Red Wing, about thirty miles downstream from the pioneer twin cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis. In one of the artist's surviving sketchbooks several views of the upper Mississippi are preserved, including three the artist identified as Red Wing.⁶ Another drawing in the same sketchbook represents a nearby scene, the distinctive river bluffs that rise steeply from the river plain near the town of Winona. An engraving by Robert Hinshelwood, after Bricher, of "Lake Pepin, Mississippi River" also exists, though the location of the original painting is

⁵It was reprinted in the *Winona Daily Republican*, June 22, 1866, p. 2, the very day that Bricher was sketching in the neighborhood.

⁶Sketchbook F, 1864-66, 1868-69, in a collection of Bricher papers preserved by descendants who do not wish to be identified. See Brown, *Bricher*, 89.

TWO SKETCHES (left) by Bricher were labeled by the artist as "Red Wing" and dated June 22, 1866. The one at right shows bluffs near Winona. They are in a Bricher sketchbook owned by unidentified descendants.



unknown.⁷ Both this view and the sketch of the Winona bluffs are undated, but the three drawings of Red Wing bear the penciled notation, "June 22/66." They suggest a quick and spontaneous recording of the scene, though there is also a careful balancing of the masses of trees on the riverbank and the untidy debris of fallen logs and tangled underbrush. This attention to composition, usually arranged in a diagonal with an off-center focus, is typical of Bricher's later, more mature work. But even in the sketches there is an equally typical sense of place, for a steamboat which appears in the distance in one of the drawings and the roughly cut logs in another indicate the presence of settled communities recently established on a remote frontier. The Hinshelwood engraving, however, with its pleasant note of a man enjoying a stroll with his dog, implies, in its image of leisurely recreation, the nearby presence of a larger and more settled community. The genre quality of this scene is further emphasized by the small rowboat (no pioneer raft or canoe!) beached in the curve of the shoreline, a motif that Bricher repeated frequently in his later paintings of the New England coast.

The artist also painted a few small oils of the area, undoubtedly based on just such preliminary sketches as the sketchbook illustrations of Red Wing.⁸ One of these, a scene at Red Wing (see cover), was recently acquired by the University of Minnesota Gallery after having been in its 1976 "Art and Architecture in Minnesota" exhibition. The picture is painted on a 9-by-18-inch board, signed twice, and dated 1866.⁹ Prominent in the painting is Red Wing's distinctive landmark, a rocky, mound-like hill called Barn Bluff which rises steeply from a curve in the river. The color palette is a muted one of greens and browns applied with a brush technique that is sketchier than the artist's later style. And though it does not achieve the glowing, sunlit quality of Bricher's mature work, or its tonal subtleties, its freshness and clarity look forward to the luminous New England shore scenes on which the artist's reputation justly rests. Moreover, underlying the painting's deceptively simple composition, as also in the sketches, there is a developed sense of form and a skillful handling of balanced mass. Like the paintings of Martin Johnson Heade, to whose art Bricher's bears the closest relationship, nature appears here eternal, immutable but nevertheless real. It is na-

ture tamed by civilization — not with Heade's neatly stacked haystacks on a salt marsh or sailboats on a vast expanse of bay, but, instead, in the newly built railroad bridge at the right. This stone-arch bridge is more, however, than an oblique reference to the progress of civilization. Without disturbing the tranquility of the scene, it unobtrusively symbolizes the opening of the West to white settlement.

Twelve years earlier John Kensett had also been a young tourist to the upper Mississippi, but his pictorial record of the Lake Pepin area in 1854, entitled "View on the Upper Mississippi" (City Art Museum, St. Louis), is a quiet dream of a remote frontier, far from the clamor of civilization and "sublime" in its unspoiled wilderness setting. If Bricher's youthful work is a less poetic statement of the theme, it reflects that blend of pragmatism and romanticism that is evident in his later work and that is, indeed, typical of American nineteenth-century landscape painting. In art, in literature, even in the political philosophy that justified the expansion westward as "manifest destiny," this merging of the real and ideal, of vision and of fact, defined for Americans their sense of themselves and expressed, as it does in Bricher's painting, their pleasure in the new land.

⁷A Bricher painting, entitled "On the Riverbank," signed and dated 1866, was sold by Sotheby-Parke Bernet, New York, in January, 1976. See Sale Catalog no. 3834, fig. 378. Though it may have been painted during the artist's Minnesota summer, the landscape more strongly suggests the Connecticut River area to which Bricher returned at the end of his western tour.

⁸In 1870 the National Academy of Design, New York, exhibited Bricher's "On the Mississippi, near La Crosse, Wisconsin — Shower Clearing," and "The Maiden's Rock, Lake Pepin, Mississippi River." Another view of the area, erroneously called "Hudson River," was formerly at the Kennedy Galleries. See Brown, *Bricher*, 16, including note 21.

⁹The painting is inscribed "A. T. Bricher" in brown at lower right and "ATB/66" in red at lower left. It was once owned by Louis Prang, the chromolithographer, and sold in his peremptory sale in 1875. It would appear that Bricher went to the upper Mississippi area for Prang, but for some reason the paintings he produced there were not made into prints. See Katherine M. McClinton, *The Chromolithographs of Louis Prang*, 190–191 (New York, 1973). The author is indebted to Jeffrey Brown for bringing this information to her attention.



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