

Chapter 8

Art Exhibitions – Minneapolis

In addition to the private art collections formed by Messrs Hill and Walker, the annual State Fair art competitions, and the Minneapolis Industrial Exposition Art Gallery, all of which were open to the public, there were private clubs as well as libraries which, from time to time, owned or displayed works of art. There were also various local and traveling art exhibitions.

A downtown Minneapolis art exhibition containing eighty oil paintings, forty watercolors, as well as etchings and engravings, was held beginning on September 25, 1878, in a suite of six rooms at the Brigham House on Hennepin Avenue. The art was all locally owned, and many of the works were “inspired” by the Old Masters. According to William Watts Folwell, then President of the University of Minnesota, “with little or no advertising, the attendance was considerable, and many were surprised at the number of good, if not rare or costly works of art, owned in Minneapolis.”¹³⁸ While the exhibition contained European paintings and watercolors, there was also an Orientalist room with Chinese, Japanese and Korean works of art. The citizen’s committee sponsoring this exhibition included John S. Bradstreet, Minneapolis’ first famous designer and interior decorator, who contributed the Orientalist room, and who will be considered later in this book.¹³⁹

The Society Norden, dating from 1871, a Minneapolis fraternal benefit society composed primarily of Swedish-American men, held a series of temporary fine art exhibits in their Minneapolis clubrooms between 1885 and 1889. These exhibits were said to have primarily reached out to their own ethnic community.¹⁴⁰

The Norwegian Art Association was incorporated in 1887. Its stated purpose was the founding of an art gallery and the promotion of Norwegian art in Minneapolis. While the gallery, located at 235 Fifth Avenue South, was said to be a success, yet the work of its continuation fell upon only a handful of members, and this caused its liquidation. The artists of the works of art exhibited there were nearly all “young and their names are quite unfamiliar to the general public, but the art lovers of every country know them,” said the *Minneapolis Tribune*. Among the artists included were Axel Ender, Jorgen Sorenson, P. V. Arbo, and Gerhard Munthe. The newspaper reported that thirty-six paintings were offered at auction on June 3, 1893, and all were sold, but “the prices were ridiculously low when it is remembered that nearly all of the artists have had their paintings in the famous salons and exhibitions of Paris, London and Berlin.”¹⁴¹

The Minneapolis Art League was organized in 1894, and its members included prominent professional local artists of the time, including Robert Koehler, Alexis J. Fournier, Herbjørn Gausta and Alex Grinager. Associate members included John S. Bradstreet, William J. Cross, and Emil Oberhoffer, the first conductor of the

Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra. The League held their initial exhibition in the spring of 1896, "in the small and ill-lit gallery of an art dealer." The following two exhibitions were held in the studio of the League's president, Robert Koehler, and thereafter those premises became the permanent home of the League.¹⁴² The third annual exhibition of the League occurred in May of 1897 at 719 Hennepin Avenue. The illustrated catalogue listed 82 works of art, including oils, pastels, charcoal, and watercolors. The exhibitors included N. R. Brewer, Bertha Corbett, Alexis Fournier, Herbjørn Gausta, Alexander Grinager, and Robert Koehler.¹⁴³

In Robert Koehler's Introduction to the 1911 *Catalogue of the Traveling Exhibit of the Artists' League of Minneapolis* he complained that, for the two weeks the pictures were exhibited in the Minneapolis Public Library, only 2,100 visitors came:

Had those who have no intelligent interest in art and no understanding of its wholesome influence on the life of the city been fairly represented, the attendance could hardly have been less than 20,000.

By way of apology Koehler added that Minneapolis "...is far from insensible to the value of art or unappreciative of its beauties. By every permanent sign she is rather eager to avail herself of all the manifold users of art."¹⁴⁴

The Publicity Club of Minneapolis (which later became the Advertising Federation of Minnesota) was founded in 1906. This Club helped to organize a display of its "Traveling Exhibit" in the premises of five participating commercial clubs in Minneapolis, for a one week interval at each site. The Club paid shipping expenses and a local insurance company provided necessary insurance. Robert Koehler prepared the catalogue.¹⁴⁵ The illustrated catalogue listed sixty-seven oils, etchings, and watercolors by twenty artists, including Edwin M. Dawes, Alexis Fournier, Herbjørn Gausta, Robert Koehler, and Grace E. McKinstry.

Other art exhibits were also scheduled in Minneapolis, either relying on local collections or showing works from elsewhere. For ten days during May of 1895, the Young Women's Christian Association sponsored a Loan Art Exhibition in the gymnasium hall at its premises at 809 Nicollet Avenue. Exhibited were watercolors, etchings and engravings lent by "the art loving citizens who are known to be possessors of desirable works."¹⁴⁶ The exhibition was for fund-raising purposes.

The Heiman-Taylor collection of 15,000 black and white reproductions of masterpieces from many European museums, of which 12,000 were un-mounted in portfolios, were included in a traveling show which was then making the rounds of the larger American cities. The show was held in Minneapolis under the auspices of the Institute of Arts and Letters, and was exhibited for a week, commencing April 10, 1898, in the four stories of the building at 623 Nicollet Avenue.¹⁴⁷ The Heiman-Taylor Art Company of Cleveland, Ohio, specialized in

reproductions and photographs of art for schools. This exhibit was strictly a money-making endeavor.

Before the commercial use of photography the principal way of reproducing works of art was through engraving and later, through lithography. In this manner the public could view and own copies works of art otherwise unavailable to them. The Heiman-Taylor Art Company was one of a number of companies which prepared and sold such art.

Reproductions of paintings appeared in magazines and newspapers and were circulated to libraries and schools, and were framed for display in the home. The journey from the artist's easel through an engraving or photograph, and then the sale as a reproduction to the public greatly increased the exposure which a painter could expect for his works of art. An early, important producer of such reproductions was Adolphe Goupil (1806-1893), a French fine arts dealer and publisher. The Goupil roster of artists which they represented included Breton, Bouguereau, and Pasini, names of European artists certainly familiar to Twin City collectors.¹⁴⁸

The Boston firm of Louis Prang accomplished similar reproduction of paintings through the process of chromolithography, specializing principally in works by American artists. The summary by Katharine M. McClinton of Prang's work in the diffusion of art also applies to the activities of Goupil:

The chromos of L. Prang & Company hit the taste of the times... The chromos of paintings sought to teach and to raise the art taste of the many; they were really an expression of the times and echoed the democratic tastes of the people...¹⁴⁹

Edmund D. Brooks was the best-known bookseller of the times in Minneapolis. Perhaps because some of the oil paintings were of literary figures and might be of interest to his patrons, Brooks hosted an exhibition of art at his Tenth Street South bookstore and gallery during the December of 1911. The *Portrait of Victor Hugo on the Seashore* by Ferdinand Victor Eugene Delacroix and *Portrait of Charles Dickens (1859)* by William Powell Frith were among the works exhibited. Also noted were works by John Everett Millais and Joseph Mallard William Turner.¹⁵⁰