

## HISTORY FROM OHA

# John Winter: The German Artist of Syracuse, New York

■ BY THOMAS HUNTER

John Winter was born in Neidermorden bei Bad Nauheim in the Grand Duchy of Hesse in 1825. As a young man in Germany, he attended the School of Designs in Frankfort on the Main from 1840 to 1847. This training would be beneficial to his ensuing career in Syracuse.

In 1848, at age 23, Winter immigrated to the U.S. He moved to Syracuse the next year and, finding that Syracusans at that time had little interest in the fine arts, established himself as an ornamental painter, often imitating wood and marble decoration on other surfaces. His business was successful, but in 1853, Winter decided to devote most of his attention to portrait painting. In between portrait commissions, for which he charged \$25 and up, he took on ornamental painting projects. In 1855, he also learned photography and became quite skilled at taking photographs.

By 1859, Winter had established himself as an exceptional portrait painter, having painted 84 portraits, mostly of local citizens. He also painted portraits from photographs. Winter flattered himself for having "met with the greatest success in procuring a correct likeness." In 1868, Winter painted a portrait of Pope Pius IX on the occasion of his Golden Jubilee. He color tinted photographic portraits from miniature to life size in his studio at 37 Bastable Arcade, the current location of the State Tower Building in downtown Syracuse. Winter warranted the quality and durability of his work, and kept samples at his studio, some several years old, to promote the close resemblance to his subjects and the resiliency of his colored photographs. Along with color tinting photographs, Winter painted portraits that he copied from photographs in oil, watercolor, or India ink. He also offered affordable carte de visites (6 for \$1.00) and ambrotypes at 25 cents each to local consumers.

Throughout his career, Winter obtained patents on several photographic apparatuses, including U.S. Patent No. 196,731, dated Oct. 30, 1877, for a useful improvement in a photograph seat. In describing his intent for the photograph chair, Winter wrote, "The object of my invention is to provide a seat or settee especially adapted to photograph galleries which shall be convenient, simple, and cheap in construction, and capable of ready adjustment and variation in form to suit the height of its occupant, or the various postures which persons sitting for a picture may wish to assume." Winter's chair provided support for the subject and could accommodate height differentials from infants to adults. It also created a more comfortable sitting position for women wearing long dresses. Winter pursued progressing photography as an art form and he envisioned other photographers creating their own portraits or artful photographs by arranging subjects in imaginative, artistic poses on his photographic seat. One of Winter's artistic photographs appeared in the December 1877 issue of *The St. Louis Practical Photographer and Illustrated Monthly Journal*, a magazine dedicated to photography. Noticing Winter's entry in the magazine, the editor of the *Syracuse Journal* complimented Winter on his photograph, titled, "The Last Rose of Summer." "The particular excellence observed by the editor, is the fine artistic taste displayed in the posturing. This, with surroundings, Mr. Winter makes a study, and the critical and very complimentary notice referred to awards him only such merit as he possesses. He is a

cultured artist as well as photographer."

John Winter also claimed he invented the stereopticon cyclorama, a panoramic projection system that used several magic lanterns suspended from the ceiling of a large cylindrical space, each projecting a magnified part of a photograph onto a large screen inside the cylindrical space. The magic lanterns dissolved the edges of the photographs creating an enlarged panoramic scene for the viewer. Winter's claim of inventing the device was challenged by Charles A. Chase who published his version of the stereopticon cyclorama in the *Optical Magic Lantern Journal* in March 1895; Winter's version appeared two months later in May. Chase, a resident of Chicago, further claimed that he exhibited his device at the Chicago Fire Cyclorama Building in August 1894. Neither man is given full credit for inventing the device.

Simultaneous to being a successful portrait painter and photographer in Syracuse, John Winter stayed involved with German affairs in the U.S. and in Germany. He advertised his gallery as the only German gallery in a city of 18,000 Germans. He also promoted his photographs as being the "finest and artistically German finished photographs."

During the American Civil War, Winter publicized that he had taken a full-length photograph of Franz Sigel, a major general in the Union Army. Sigel commanded the XI Corps of the Army of the Potomac, comprised mainly of German immigrant soldiers. During the war, Sigel was criticized as being a rather inept commander but he had a knack for recruiting German immigrants for the Union Army. While in Syracuse, perhaps on a recruiting mission to fill depleted regiments, Winter took the general's photograph and then sold them to "the friends and admirers of Gen. Sigel."

Winter had an active social life both as a choir singer and as a member of organizations like the Washington Artillery and the Black Hunters. Winter was very dedicated to his German background and was a founding member of the *Liederkrantz*, a German cultural organization. On May 1, 1871, Winter portrayed Kaiser Wilhelm I in the German Jubilee commemorating the unification of Germany that previous January. The Jubilee was the largest demonstration held by Germans in Syracuse at the time. The city's German citizens had planned the event for several weeks and it commenced with a salute of 100 cannons stationed behind Haberle Brewery on Butternut Street. Residents of the Second Ward festooned the area with evergreen trees and the national colors of Germany and the U.S. A two-mile procession featured military and civic organizations, along with the police and fire departments. Winter, dressed as the Kaiser, rode in a carriage with three other men who portrayed notable German dignitaries. The Jubilee ended that evening with dinner and a fireworks display. It only made sense to Winter that he should send Wilhelm I a photograph of his portrayal. Winter received a letter from the Kaiser's



nephew, Prince Ludwig, thanking Winter for his flattering depiction. It was reputed to be the only letter sent by a member of German royalty to a private citizen in America. The Kaiser also sent Winter a needle gun and ammunition as a token of his appreciation.

Needless to say, John Winter led a full and rewarding life in Syracuse. He was 81 when he died in 1906 and is buried in Woodlawn Cemetery. He died within three hours of his younger brother Peter, a tailor in Syracuse. Winter's son, John Winter, Jr., followed in his father's footsteps by also becoming a professional photographer.

John Winter's artistic legacy lives on in the artwork collection of the Onondaga Historical Association (OHA) Museum. The OHA Museum owns eight of his paintings, including portraits of local citizens, landscapes, and still lifes. One of his still lifes is on display in the museum's current exhibit, "No Place Like Home: Immigration and Refugee Resettlement in Onondaga County." Winter's experience as a successful German immigrant is featured in this exhibit that juxtaposes 19th and 20th century immigrants to Onondaga County — Italians, Irish, Latinos, and Eastern Europeans, to newer immigrants — Iraqis, Sudanese, Burmese, Bhutanese, and those from former Soviet-bloc countries, in the 21st century.

Western and Eastern European immigrants in search of a better quality of life, who once worked on the Erie Canal or local railroads, brewed beer, or made typewriters, vehicle gears, washing machines, and shoes, have been succeeded by those from Southeast Asia, Africa, or the Middle East, many with the same life goals, who make furniture at L. & J.G. Stickley or candles at Cathedral Candle Company. Other recent immigrants are medical or engineering professionals; still others have found work in commercial laundries, hotels, and ethnic restaurants.

Thomas Hunter is the curator of collections at the Onondaga Historical Association ([www.cnyhistory.org](http://www.cnyhistory.org)), located at 321 Montgomery St. in Syracuse.

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