John Winter: The German Artist of Syracuse, New York

By Thomas Hunter

John Winter was born in Neidermolen bei Bad Nauheim in the Grand Duchy of Hesse in 1825. As a young man in Germany, he attended the School of Designs in Frankfurt 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 Syracuse at that time had little interest in the fine arts, established himself as an ornamental painter, often inserting wood and marble decora-
tion on other surfaces. His business was successful, but in 1855, 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.

In 1859, Winter had exhibited himself as an ex-
ceptional portrait painter, having painted 84 portraits, mostly of local citizens. He also painted portraits from photographs. Winter fulfilled 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 also color tinted photographic portraits from miniature to the size in his studio at 38 Nassau Arcade, the current location of the State Tower Building in downtown Syracuse. Winter wanted the quality and durability of his work, and kept samples of his studio, some years several (0.4), to promote the close resemblance to his subjects and the readiness of his colored photo-
grahs. Along with color filming photograph, Winter painted portraits that his copy from photographs in oil, watercolor or ink. He also offered affordable card de visite ($1 for 100) and ambrotypes at 25 cents each to local consumers.

Throughout his career, Winter obtained patents on several photographic apparatus, including U.S. Patent No. 196,731, dated Oct. 30, 1877, for a useful improvement in a photographic seat. In describing his intent for the photographic chair, Winter wrote, "The object of my invention is to provide a seat or settle expressly adapted to photographic galleries which shall be convenient, simple, and cheap in construc-
tion, and capable of ready adjustment and variation in form to suit the height of its occupant, or the vari-
cious postures which persons sitting for a picture may wish to assume." Winter’s chair provided support for the subject and could accommodate height differ-
entials from infants to adults. It created a more comfortable sitting position for women wearing long dresses. Winter printed advertising photography as an art form and he envisioned other photographers using their artistic ideas on art or commercial proofs by arranging subjects in imaginative, artistic poses on his photographic seat. One of Winter’s artistic photographs appeared in the December 1877 issue of St. Louis Practical Photographer and Monthly Journal, a magazine dedicated to photo-
graphy. Noting Winter’s entry in the magazine, the ed-
or of the Syracuse Journal complimented Winter on his photographs, titled “The Last Rose of Summer.” "The particular excellence observed by the editor, the fine artistic taste displayed in the portrait. With surroundings, Mr. Winter makes a study and the very critical and complimentary notice referred to awards him such encomium as he possesses. He is a

artist, cultured artist as well as photographer.”

Winter also claimed he invented the sternopter cyclorama, a panoramic projection system using several magic lanterns suspended from the ceiling of a large cylinder-shaped space, each projecting a magnified part of a photograph onto a large screen inside the cylindrical space. The magic lanterns dis-
covered the edges of the photographs creating an en-
larged panoramic scene for the viewer. Winter’s claim of inventing the device was challenged by Charles A. Chase who published his version of the stereopterie cyclorama in the Optical Magic Lantern Journal in March 1895. Winter’s version appeared two months later in May, 1895, 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.

Simultaneously to being a successful portrait painter and photographer in Syracuse, John Winter started 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 eternally German finished photography.”

During the American Civil War, Winter published that he had taken a full-length photograph of Francis Siegel, a major general in the Union Army. Siegel commanded the V Corps of the Army of the Potomac, comprised mainly of German immigrant soldiers. During the war, Siegel was criticized as being a traitor and was present commonly to hate a lowly $89.50 for recruiting German immigrants for the Lincoln Army. While in Syracuse, perhaps on a recruiting mission, Siegel reputedly asked soldiers to “the friends and admirers of Gen. Siegel.”

Winter later an active social life both as a choir singer and as a member of organizations like the Washington Artillery and the Black Horse Lancers. Winter was very dedicated to his German background and was a founding member of the Landesverein, a German cultural organization. On May 1, 1877, 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 Roberts Avenue in the front yard of the Landesverein. The main event fired the area with cannon shots and the national colors of Germany and the U.S. A new

A milestone feature military and civic organiza-
tions, along with the police and fire departments. Winter, dressed as the Kaiser, rode in a carriage with three others who portrayed notable German digni-
taries. The Jubilee included drinking with daim, and a fireworks display. It only made sense to Winter that his ally, Karl Wilhelm, would be a photographer of his portrait. Winter received a letter from the Kaiser's nephew, Prince Ludwig, thanking Winter for his par-
taking in the Jubilee. It was reputed to be the only letter sent by a member of German royalty to a private citi-
en in America. The Kaiser also sent Winter a needle gun and ammunition as a token of his appreciation.

Winter’s work and his artistic legacy lives on in the art collection of the Ord Madison Art Association (OMAA) Museum. The OMAA 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 cur-
rent exhibit, “No Place Like Home: Immigration and Refuge Restored in Onondaga County.” Winter’s experience as a successful German artist is featured in this exhibit that juxtaposes 19th and 20th century immigrants to Onondaga County — Irish, Irish, Latinos, and Eastern Europeans, to new immigrants — Indians, Sumerians, Burmese, and those from former Soviet bloc countries, in the 21st century.

Western and Eastern European immigrants in search of a better quality of life, once worked on the Erie Canal or in local railroads, breweries, or potato factories; wore working clothes, wearing machines, and shoes, have been succeeded by those from Southeast Asia, Africa, or the Middle East, many with the same life goal, who make furniture at L & J.G. Stickley or candles at Candlestick Company Company. Other recent immigrants are medical or engineering professionals; still others have found work in com-
puter sales and training, hotels, and ethnic restaurants.

Thomas Hunter is the curator of collections at the Ord Madison Art Association. He can be reached at thomas.hunter@omaa.org. Located at 321 Montgomery Street in Syracuse.