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## German Artists – American Cyclorama: A Nineteenth-Century Case of Transnational Cultural Transfer

In the late nineteenth-century, a visit to “the panorama” (or “cyclorama” in the United States) was a popular pastime for many Europeans and Americans.<sup>1</sup> Huge, circular panorama buildings were prominent features in the cityscape.<sup>2</sup> Inside these rotundas (sometimes called the IMAXes of the nineteenth century), iconic landscapes, mythological scenes, and most often major historical events were depicted on 360 degree installations that covered up to 15,000 square feet of painted canvass. Diorama displays in front of the paintings, enhanced by sound effects and lighting, created an experience that made the viewer—standing at the center of the installation on a raised platform—feel as if s/he were part of another world, landscape, or event. The illusion allowed audiences in London to walk through Rome, in Berlin to observe the Battle of Sedan, in Munich to experience the Crucifixion of Christ, or in Chicago to view the Battle of Missionary Ridge.

Most panoramas were created and run by private joint-stock companies. They required significant investments: rotunda buildings were built to specification not only for exhibits, but also for the studios where they were painted; dozens of people were employed in the creation and installation of the panoramas; and special rail-transportation was arranged to move the huge canvass rolls from the studio to the exhibit hall or from one exhibit hall to another. To ensure maximum viewership and profitability, panorama companies catered to the tastes of different audiences in different regions. For Civil War cycloramas in the United States, for example, the exact moment of a particular battle scene (often the turning point, where the battle could have gone either way) was carefully chosen to create a unifying viewing experience. At the same time, great attention was paid to historical accuracy and political neutrality in the presentation. This allowed visitors in the North to relive their victory, while Southerners could reminisce on a heroic defeat, —and the panorama companies were maximizing their profits by appealing to every possible audience.

Panoramas were heavily and successfully promoted. Businesses and organizations included panorama visits in their social events programs.<sup>3</sup> Local newspapers and magazines regularly

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<sup>1</sup> This is reflected in literature from the era, for example in Theodor Fontane’s 1894-95 novel *Effi Briest*, where the title character and her husband Geert von Instetten visit the Franco-Prussian War *Battle of St. Privat Panorama* in Berlin.

<sup>2</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, many cities had more than one panorama: Munich, for example, had three, while Berlin and Chicago had six.

<sup>3</sup> Frequently the panorama companies gave away free tickets to members of prominent organizations. For examples from the U.S. see: “Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine”, vol. II, July 1888, p.527; or “Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the American Street Railway Association”, Washington, 1889, p.116.

wrote about “their” panoramas, while running paid advertisements by the companies at the same time. Placards were plastered all over the city, thousands of catalogs were distributed, and as a result large numbers of people visited the installations. For many visitors, visiting a cyclorama was more than a profound experience.<sup>4</sup> It also shaped their impression and understanding of the depicted event. In the United States, twenty years after the country’s Civil War, a generation of Americans was now deeply influenced by this popular mass medium. The experience of the war lived on in memory, and one can presume that over time the cyclorama experience in fact became—if only so subtly—part of the nation’s collective memory of the actual event.

In view of the fact that panoramas were so popular, lucrative, and influential, it is astounding how little is known about them today. One reason is the physical disappearance of the buildings and the artwork. As the popularity of panoramas waned in the early twentieth century with the advent of the motion picture, the rotunda buildings were torn down and the huge panorama paintings destroyed. Sometimes the canvasses were reused as backdrops in theater productions or cut up to be sold as small paintings. At other times, they were destroyed completely. Today only two nineteenth-century panoramas are still on display in the United States: the “Battle of Atlanta” by the American Panorama Company (artists Friedrich Wilhelm Heine and August Lohr) in Atlanta, and the newly restored “Battle of Gettysburg” by Paul Philippoteaux in Gettysburg.

Even less is known about the people who created the images, especially in America, where the first panorama companies were founded in the 1880s. Perhaps one reason lies in the fact that in America almost all cycloramas were created by foreigners, mostly artists from France and German-speaking Europe who were hired to come to the United States for the sole purpose of producing panoramas. One can ask, how much influence immigrant artists had on the portrayal of some of the most iconic events in American history.

Literature on the subject is virtually non-existent, and primary source material has been hard to find. This makes the diaries and notes of one of the most prominent panorama painters of the time, Friedrich Wilhelm Heine (1845–1921) a remarkable and heretofore untapped resource. When the Heine diaries were discovered in the archives of the Milwaukee County Historical Society (MCHS) a couple of years ago, nobody knew what they contained. Like so many other German-language documents that languish in American archives, the Heine diaries were ignored because local researchers could not read German, and even fewer people could read the Old German Script. Now the “Heine Diary Project,” a collaboration of the MCHS, the Museum of Wisconsin Art (MWA), and the Max Kade Institute at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, seeks to make

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<sup>4</sup> There are many contemporary accounts describing the sometimes dramatic reaction of visitors. Some Civil War veterans supposedly felt transported back to the battle field and burst into tears. Advertisements and newspaper articles re-enforced the notion of recreated reality, such as this story in the CHICAGO SUNDAY TRIBUNE on October 19, 1890 of the *The Blind Soldier Who Saw It All*. In this account, a veteran who had been blinded during battle of Gettysburg, visits the “Battle of Gettysburg” panorama with his granddaughter and through the child’s description of the panorama “sees” the battle again.

the diaries accessible by transcribing them from the Old German Script to modern German type and translating selected sections.<sup>5</sup>

Friedrich Wilhelm Heine had been educated at the famous Weimar Art School and was already a well-known artist in Dresden who had—among many other things—painted the battles of the Franco-Prussian when he was recruited by the American Panorama Company and moved to America in 1885. Almost every day over the course of 45 years (1879–1921), Heine jotted down everything he did and experienced, every meeting, business transaction and letter, whether written or received, frequently adding drawings and sketches to illustrate his points.<sup>6</sup> The diaries offer an unparalleled glimpse into the national and international connections of the panorama studios, the panorama business, the process of producing a panorama, the life of an immigrant artist, the city of Milwaukee and its German-speaking citizenry, and many other topics. They also show how an originally European entertainment form was transferred to America, and how German artistic elements, ideals, and cultural expressions made their way into American panorama productions.

The birth of American panoramas was in itself a wholesale transfer of European panorama art and craft. Early American entrepreneurs seeing the profit potential for panoramas, shipped European panorama paintings across the Atlantic. Quickly finding the transportation costs to the United States prohibitive and also wanting to cater to the tastes of local audiences, they decided to produce panoramas in America. They did not, however, train American artists in the panorama craft, but brought in artists from Europe. Such an entrepreneur was Chicago businessman William Wehner, who in 1885 hired a group of well-known artists from the art schools of German-speaking Europe to found the American Panorama Company in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Wehner had put Austrian painter August Lohr in charge of selecting artists on the basis of their experience with panorama painting and their different specialties (battle painting, landscapes, portraits, animals, etc.), and wooing them with lucrative contracts.<sup>7</sup> The first five (Lohr, Heine, Hermann Michalowski, Franz Rohrbeck and Bernhard Schneider) made the transatlantic journey together, traveling first class (compliments to William Wehner) on the new steamship Fulda. They were quickly followed by two more artists: Albert (Servus) Richter and Wilhelm Schröter. In Milwaukee, Heine was responsible for composing and producing the panorama paintings, and supervising the artists.

This is about as much as had been known about the origins of the American Panorama Company before the Heine diaries were discovered.<sup>8</sup> The Heine diaries now for the first time provide us with details of the inner workings of the Company and its artistic endeavors. For example, right

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<sup>5</sup> To date about four years of diary entries (April 1885–December 1888, and October 1898–July 1899) have been transcribed. The first phase of the transcription project was made possible with support of the Bradley Foundation, Milwaukee, WI. All quotes are from the original, unpublished text and were translated by the author.

<sup>6</sup> Complicating the attempt at unlocking the diaries' content is the fact that Heine wrote only for himself and with no other audience in mind, using his own system of abbreviations and cryptic phrases. At the same time, it is precisely the personal nature of his notes that provides us today with uniquely unfiltered and honest information and makes the diaries such an invaluable resource.

<sup>7</sup> Diary entries before April 1885 have not yet been transcribed. We are looking forward to learning more about the recruitment process, contract details, etc. when these pages become accessible.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Peter C. Merrill., *German Immigrant Artists in America*, 1997; p. 95, 162–63, 242.

at the beginning we learn that not only artists, but also some of their support staff, were brought to America, like Robert Klotzer, who worked as a model for Heine. Two of the major themes that run through the diary entries are: 1) the constant pull and tug between the need to produce an exciting, profitable virtual experience in a short time amidst stiff competition from other panorama companies, on the one hand, and the desire to create high quality art on a giant scale that can stand alone on its own artistic merits, on the other hand; and 2) the intensive contacts and exchanges the artists had with their colleagues in Germany and the degree to which they were at the same time embedded in the German-American community in this country.

It is striking to read how singularly focused the panorama business was from the very first day. While still in Germany, the crew already knew that it was to create a panorama of the “Battle of Missionary Ridge”<sup>9</sup> immediately upon its arrival in Milwaukee. Thus Heine already read everything he could find on the Civil War and this battle even before his departure. After the *Fulda* landed in New York, the artists traveled to Chicago, where they arrived late on May 12, 1885. The next day, May 13, Heine and Wehner visited two panorama exhibits made by a competing company in Chicago, Paul Philippoteaux’s “Siege of Paris” and the “Battle of Gettysburg” by Philippoteaux’s father Felix.<sup>10</sup> They measured and critically analyzed the displays, continuing the same day to Milwaukee, which would be their home for the foreseeable future. No time was wasted in getting settled and beginning the panorama business. Still that afternoon, Wehner, Heine and Lohr inspected the construction site for the new American Panorama Company studio; they visited the “small” Kindt & Gardner panorama exhibit standing next door; they looked for permanent housing; and they purchased art supplies at the “Kunsthandlung Schade.”

The following days were taken up with research and with ordering equipment and more supplies for the production. The goal was to find out as much as possible about the Battle of Missionary Ridge and to acquire photos of the battle site, as well as authentic props and costumes and other visuals, to make the portrayal as realistic as possible. Thus Heine visited art stores, corresponded with photographers, and purchased Civil War uniforms and other artifacts. Heine and Rohrbeck regularly visited the Milwaukee Soldiers Home to make sketches of veterans (especially those with war injuries), canons, and other weaponry.

A week later, Heine, Lohr, and Schneider traveled to Chattanooga for onsite sketches of the landscape of the Battle of Missionary Ridge site. This was a common practice among panorama painters, and when Heine and Co. walked the terrain, they ran across scaffolding left by the Berlin panorama painter Eugen Bracht, who had already been there<sup>11</sup>. The race was on! The group found Orchard Knob to be the optimal vantage point for a 360 degree view of the battlefield and hired a carpenter to build a scaffold. They consulted with local citizens about any changes in the landscape and vegetation in the 22 years since the battle took place. Heine sketched everything in sight to get a feel for the unfamiliar surroundings, drawing buildings and

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<sup>9</sup> The Battle of Missionary Ridge was fought November 25, 1863, as part of the Chattanooga Campaign of the American Civil War. Following the Union victory in the Battle of Lookout Mountain on November 24, Union forces under Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant assaulted Missionary Ridge and defeated the Confederate Army of Tennessee, commanded by Gen. Braxton Bragg.

<sup>10</sup> Heine, vol 1, p.320.

<sup>11</sup> Heine, vol 1, p.324.

people, particularly African Americans, whom he had had little practice painting before. A visit to the Chattanooga national cemetery for the annual Decoration Day parade<sup>12</sup> proved to be especially useful: Heine got to observe a number of different regiments, weapons, and military bands.<sup>13</sup>

The artist and Civil War veteran Theodore R. Davis<sup>14</sup> was hired by Wehner as a consultant, and first disagreements about the composition of the painting ensued. While Heine insisted on historical accuracy and wanted to depict the battle as it unfolded, Davis wanted to focus on the generals and place them prominently in the foreground. Eventually Heine's view prevailed. Heine and Lohr also insisted that every person in the painting should be portrayed as an individual, even though this was a time-consuming process, scoffing at the work of other companies that only depicted "generic soldiers." Some details they missed, however: The panorama was already in the scale-model stage, when it was pointed out that the horses painted were not the breed used in the battle. Animal painter Albert Richter had gone to Milwaukee slaughter houses for his sketches of "fallen horses." Now the panorama showed Arabian horses (Richter knew enough not to portray the brewery horses he mostly saw in Milwaukee) and not the "Mexican horses" that were used in the battle. All the horses had to be repainted.<sup>15</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into the fascinating details of how this and other panoramas were produced; suffice it to say that there were a number of challenges relating to time pressure, the different personalities of the artists, difficulties with procuring quality supplies, and the extremely cold Milwaukee winter conditions that affected panorama painting in ways the artists had never confronted in Europe.<sup>16</sup> On February 23, 1886, the Missionary Ridge Panorama was opened to grand fanfare in Chicago. All together, it had cost \$60,000.<sup>17</sup> While the original Missionary Ridge panorama was still in production, the Company had already started to make copies of it. Simultaneously, preliminary work on a new Battle of Atlanta Panorama had begun, and on March 3, Wehner entered into yet another contract for four panoramas with Heine and Lohr: "Their subjects shall be battle scenes determined by me [Wehner], the same size and quality as *Missionary Ridge*. Prices are as follows: \$27,000 for every original, \$16,000 for every copy."<sup>18</sup> Also around that time, one of the richest citizens of Milwaukee, meat-packing tycoon

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<sup>12</sup> Memorial Day

<sup>13</sup> "...different regiments and militia groups file out from the depot/ young people in dark-green uniforms [with] white epaulets, helmets and shoulder straps. Then again there are others in dark-blue uniforms with red spikes on their helmets/ a negro militia – strong guys in old uniforms: dark-blue tunics with light-blue pants/ then there are 40-60 old veterans, mostly civilian clothing/ .../ a special train takes all the soldiers to the cemetery... where they march in formation to the sound of dull, regular drumbeat; Heine, Vol1, p325

<sup>14</sup> In 1886, Theodore R. Davis published a detailed description of "How a Great Battle Panorama is Made" in *St. Nicholas—An Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks*, based on his work with F.W. Heine and the American Panorama Company on the Battle of Missionary Ridge and Atlanta panoramas.

<sup>15</sup> Heine, vol2, p.12.

<sup>16</sup> In January, the outdoor temperature was 8°F, and snow threatened to collapse the roof of the studio, which was heated with a steam heater. Condensation dropped from the roof, the artists had to work under umbrellas, and they had to choose new paints that could better handle the moisture. At some point, pipes froze, halting the production altogether. When a thaw came, water ran through the roof and the windows, creating "white and brown streaks" on the almost finished canvass, which now had to be wiped off and retouched.

<sup>17</sup> Heine, vol 2, p.11.

<sup>18</sup> Heine, vol 2, p.12.

John Plankinton, approached Heine about a possible commission for a “biblically themed panorama” set in Jerusalem.

In short, panoramas were a booming business and the Company needed more artists. Again they turned to Germany, advertising in Dresden, Munich, Düsseldorf, and Berlin-Charlottenburg. Applications came in immediately, and four new painters were quickly hired.<sup>19</sup> During his first year in America, Heine wrote an average of four to six letters, postcards, or telegrams to Germany every day, and received as many in return. Summarized in the diaries, the correspondence reveals to a previously unknown extent how closely the panorama artists were personally and professionally connected to the art scene in Germany. The American Panorama Company itself was a German enclave where everybody spoke German, most sub-contractors and suppliers were German, and business was run mostly in German.<sup>20</sup> In Milwaukee, the artists lived in a vibrant German-American community, where they shopped in German stores, went to German theaters and taverns, worshipped in German churches, joined German clubs and music organizations, etc. In short, the American Panorama Company became part of a uniquely German-American and regional culture, and at the same time it contributed to the community that became known as the “German Athens.”

German cultural forms, historical perspectives, and aesthetics of the time were eventually reflected in panoramas, too. While historic authenticity was important in the depiction of the Civil War-themed panoramas, the situation was somewhat different for the “Crucifixion of Christ” panorama (also called “Jerusalem” panorama) that the American Panorama Company produced in late 1886. Heine and Lohr wanted to travel to Jerusalem for an onsite study, but Wehner was against such an expensive journey. Instead, in the fall of 1886, Heine and Lohr traveled to Europe, where they met with fellow artists and extensively toured art exhibits, panoramas, and museums in Paris, London, Munich, Berlin, Dresden, and Leipzig. In addition, they did advance work for their new Jerusalem Panorama. They visited Piglheim’s Jerusalem Panorama in Munich and hired Karl Frosch, who had worked on it. They also went on a shopping spree, purchasing drawings and photographs of Palestine, books about the Orient, oriental-looking silk fabrics and costumes, camel hair bags, reproductions of Roman armor and antic vessels, theater props, such as card-board Roman helmets, wood-carvings of Christ on the Cross, and other items to ship to Milwaukee and use for their own panorama.<sup>21</sup> We now know that the American Panorama Company’s depiction of the people and the landscape of Jerusalem at the time of the “Crucifixion of Christ” panorama was informed not only by centuries of central European religious and cultural interpretation, but also by costume and entertainment fashions of late nineteenth century Germany.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Heine, vol 2, p.5–6, 10, 12.

<sup>20</sup> When Heine came to America, he did not speak English and neither did the other painters. All business interactions on a national scale were undertaken by William Wehner. Even though Heine preferred German surroundings wherever he went, he strove to learn English as quickly as possible to be able to communicate with Americans without the aid of an interpreter. His efforts are chronicled in the diary in detail, and provide an interesting study case for linguists researching foreign language acquisition by adult learners.

<sup>21</sup> Heine, vol 2, p.42ff.

<sup>22</sup> Back in the United States, where the press diligently kept up with all panorama news, it was reported that Heine and Lohr had actually traveled to Palestine and had brought with them a cache of materials to be used for the panorama. An especially erroneous account appeared in the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, New York (December 4, 1886):

While these few examples show German cultural influence on American art and entertainment and the interpretation and presentation of motifs that had a profound influence on the shaping of American national identity, they also raise more questions and beckon for more research. As the 150th anniversary of the American Civil War approaches, this pivotal event in American history will again be commemorated in different ways, including parades and reenactments. One may wonder to what extent the pageantry and indeed the American memory of the Civil War has been influenced by the way the Civil War story was told through the lens of nineteenth-century panoramas. On a different level, the story of the American panorama and the F.W. Heine diaries shows how easily history is forgotten and excluded from the national narrative, if it is documented in an immigrant language. I hope this paper will serve to encourage scholars to consult German-language resources found in America not only to elucidate German-American immigration or heritage studies, but also to examine a wide variety of issues that transcend national boundaries and cultural hemispheres.

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*Milwaukee, Wis., December 4. While the German journalists were holding their annual festival last night at the West Side Turner Hall the drapery of an Oriental Village, erected in the main hall, took fire from a gas jet. The hall was crowded, but all escaped without injury. The fire destroyed a valuable collection of Oriental costumes, coats of arms, pottery, etc. which had been loaned to the newspaper men by Messrs. Lohr & Heine, who had just returned with them from Palestine. They were to be used as models for a panorama and were very valuable. A large number of oil paintings and a portion of the receipts of the festival, amounting to about \$700, were also consumed. The loss is \$5000; no insurance.*

Not only had Lohr and Heine not just returned from Palestine, the "collection" also was not from Palestine, its "value" is indicated by the fact that it was used in a costume fest at the local Turner Hall, and last not least the fire only did some damage to the carpeting, and "from our costumes the fire only singed one camelhair blanket and a few helmets." Heine, vol 2, p.56.