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**RUDOLPH FRIEDRICH KURZ
A SWISS ARTIST
ON THE AMERICAN FRONTIER**

BY JOHN FRANCIS McDERMOTT



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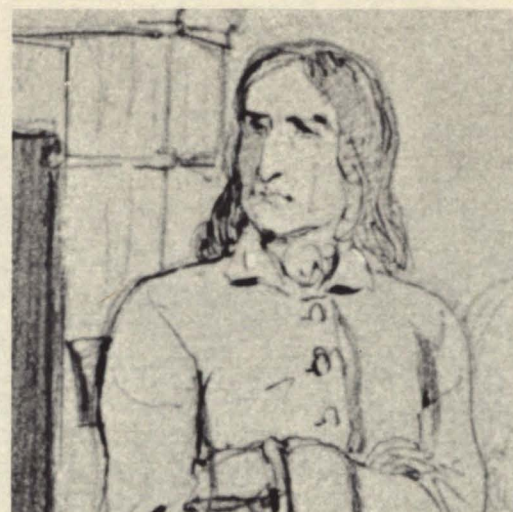
RUDOLPH FRIEDRICH KURZ A SWISS ARTIST ON THE AMERICAN FRONTIER

A narrative of the experiences of a Swiss artist on the American frontier in the 1850's, written especially for this issue of the *American Scene* by John Francis McDermott, research professor of humanities, Southern Illinois University.

Presenting for the first time the complete portfolio of the artist's works as preserved among the collections of the Thomas Gilcrease Institute; with a brief introduction by David C. Hunt, Gilcrease staff editor.

Cover illustration: Indians Gathering Wood. Watercolor. 13½ x 10 in. Reproduced on this page and on inside front cover: Buffalo Crossing a River. Watercolor. 16 x 11¼ in. This unfinished picture probably represents a scene Kurz witnessed on the Upper Missouri River in July, 1851.





Detail from "The Cree Chief at Fort Union," reproduced in full on page 13, showing self portrait of the artist.

It is hard for us to recapture nowadays the sensations of life as it was lived along the settling frontier in America more than a hundred years ago—or to imagine, for example, conditions as they existed on the prairies west of the Mississippi in the early half of the last century. For only scattered tracts remain of that once vast wilderness from which this nation derived its original strength and purpose, and nothing at all of that wild and lonely frontier where so much of the romance of our immediate past was written.

Nevertheless, it is possible to realize something of that time and place from an examination of the records which survive from that period. Indeed, there are no livelier recollections of the western frontier than the recollections of those who lived their lives upon it, or in passing observed its various phases of development; and as times moves away from that period in our history such reports as they have left behind become increasingly important to those who would investigate the past.

It is with the artist on the early day frontier, however, that the following article is concerned. For in a day before the camera was known or in wide use, those men who roamed about the wilderness recording in their sketchbooks or on canvas whatever caught their attention or fired their imaginations succeeded in producing a unique documentary of their times. Capturing scenes of a savage life beyond the fringes of civilization, they preserved for us distinct and varied impressions of an era in our history that will always interest us as Americans: that period of our first great growth and development as a nation, when the larger part of this country of ours lay unexplored and unexploited.

There were a surprising number of artists on the edge of the wilderness in the nineteenth century. Some were draftsmen or illustrators engaged in government surveys, traveling in the company of military expeditions or traders' caravans; others came as adventuring students of eastern or European art academies, searching for new subjects and experiences to describe. Certainly the wild land west of the Mississippi afforded every resource in the way of scenery or subject matter from which such men might draw inspiration, and many of their surviving works reflect that interest in exploration, discovery, and adventure that so typified those times.

The following article, written especially for this issue of the American Scene by John Francis McDermott, deals with one of the lesser known reporters of American frontier life in the mid-nineteenth century: traveling Swiss artist, Rudolph Friedrich Kurz, whose diary of his sojourn at Fort Union on the Upper Missouri in 1851 and '52 was discovered by the writer of the following piece a few years ago in Berne, Switzerland.

McDermott, who is a research professor of humanities at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, is also the author of *Seth Eastman, Pictorial Historian of the Indian* and other, briefer studies of several of the frontier artists of the past century. The article featured here is the second of his to be reproduced in the American Scene, an earlier article on the life and work of Rocky Mountain artist Alfred Jacob Miller having been published for the Gilcrease readers in 1962.

Rudolph Friedrich Kurz died without fulfilling his dream, but what a legacy he left us! He did not, like George Catlin, paint hundreds of oils reporting many Indian tribes in many places. He was not as able a draughtsman as Karl Bodmer, his fellow-Bernese, and certainly was not a watercolorist equal to that master. His very career was a series of mischances. But each unhappy blow, as he himself realized, led the persistent young romantic closer to what he most wanted to do.

He was helped by no patron but had to make his own opportunity, and much eventually came of it. When he died in 1871 he bequeathed to the world a body of studies, a visual record of Indian and fur trade life on the Missouri River in the mid-nineteenth century fuller and more detailed than that of any other artist who visited the western country. For exactness of observation, careful reporting, and sharp documentation of the frontier world, there have been few to match this young man who set himself to paint the romantic life of the Indian.

Born in Berne in 1818, Kurz, like many another Swiss boy had looked forward to becoming a farmer, but by the time he was sixteen he felt the "love of painting . . . already gaining the mastery" over him.

"From the moment I determined to become an artist," he later wrote in his journal, "my life purpose was fixed: I would devote my talents to the portrayal of the aboriginal forests, the wild animals that inhabited them, and to the Indians. From that moment I had an ideal—a definite purpose in life to the attainment of which I might dedicate all my powers. To depict with my brush the romantic life of the American Indian seemed to me a subject worthy of the manifold studies I was to undertake."

When he was twenty he went to Paris to study. In 1839 the Baron von Humboldt, to whom he confided his ambitions, recommended his traveling to Mexico, but Karl Bodmer urged him not to set out until he was well practiced in drawing natural objects as well as men and animals. So intensely did the young Kurz work for eight months—from seven in the morning until ten at night, six days a week—that he exhausted himself with overstrain and in a fit of despondency threw his sketches into the Seine.

A four month tour of Normandy and Brittany, however, so rested and eased him that he returned to Paris renewed and eager. After three years in France he was forced by lack of money to return to Switzerland, where he found that his paintings did not sell; and the hopes that he had a place as drawing master in an academy was lost with the death of the friendly director.

Determined to go to America to prosecute his studies of the Indians, he sailed from Le Havre in the fall of 1846 and arrived at New Orleans on Christmas Eve. The war with Mexico caused him to abandon his original plan. He considered Texas, but was advised against going there "on account of the great number of lawless ne'er-do-wells who made that part of the country unsafe."

Though he found the woodlands of Louisiana interesting, the public sale of slaves was distasteful to him. So he set off for St. Louis on New Year's Day, 1847. Four possible explorations he was considering: travel over the Santa Fe Trail to the border of Mexico, over the Oregon Trail to Fort Laramie and California, up the Missouri River to the country of the Sioux and Crow Indians, or up the Mississippi to the land of the Chippewas and Winnebagoes. For the time being he was unable to take any one of these tours, for everything cost money.



St. Louis pleased him, for there he found a number of his countrymen. But to earn a living was difficult. Though at least one newspaper gave him a notice, he obtained no portrait commissions.

"As artist, I had no chance at all there: daguerreotypists completely crowded out portrait painters; lithographers needed only printers — no daughtsmen; to get a position as instructor in a girl's school I had to be a married man; to be employed in a boy's school I had to be a Romanist. On the other hand, as house painter I might have met with success. But I grew dizzy at the thought of hanging high up on houses and steamboats, either bronzed by the sun or rocked by the wind. If I had been willing to settle down in St. Louis I might have been able to make a good income as decorator. But Indians—I had already seen several—appealed to me much more than business affairs."

There was a possibility that when summer came he might have a chance to go up the Mississippi as clerk to a fur trader. In the meantime, on February 15 he witnessed the celebration of the eighty-third anniversary of the founding of St. Louis, "a turn-out show" in which "government officials, the oldest inhabitants, Free Masons, Odd Fellows, school children, firemen with their brilliant fire engines, hunters in the dress of mountaineers, and militia" all marched "in procession with different bands of musicians." Even a model of the first steamboat to reach St. Louis, the *General Pike*, "was carried on the shoulders of sailors." In the evening: "bonfires in the streets, 'transparents,' sky rockets, enthusiastic speeches, much eating and drinking."

Late in March Alfred Michel invited Kurz to go with him on a business trip to Nauvoo and at the end of May took him up the Mississippi to

Galena. In November the young Swiss accompanied Michel to New Orleans, returning to spend the winter in St. Louis. During this year he had some kind of temporary employment, but he omitted from his journal when he prepared it for publication "prosaic accounts" of his ways of earning a livelihood.

But all the time, everywhere, he was sketching: the woods of Louisiana, scenes at Galena, the Mormon Temple at Nauvoo, Fox Indians at Rock Island, Choctaws at New Orleans, antiquities at St. Louis. Once he had just settled down on the deck of a steamboat to make a sketch of Fort Armstrong when the boilers blew up. Most of the time he was looking for "picturesque woodland scenes" and of those he found plenty, particularly along the banks of the little Cahokia River opposite St. Louis. He painted a number of horses from life, always a favorite subject with him.

Now that he had "actually seen primeval woods and the wild beasts, Nature's true children," his desire of earlier years had "become a passion." He had happily not been disappointed in the woodlands and the forests; they were, he had found, "far more rich, included more that was original, and the Indians were of nobler type" than he had ever dreamed. He had thus far been able to observe the woods and the prairies and the river at every season of the year and longed next to study Indians and

Three Indians on Horseback. Wash. 21 x 14 in. The careful posing of these figures—probably Iowas on the top of Black Snake Hill, overlooking the Missouri River—and the size of the picture suggests that this was one of the compositions developed by Kurz between 1852 and 1856.

Group of Indians Encamped. Watercolor. 28 x 13 1/4 in. An interesting example of the finished work of Kurz; the scene is obviously built up from sketches he had made of groups of Indians coming into St. Joseph to visit the Indian Agent.





Left: Witthae, Iowa wife of the artist. Wash. 10½ x 14 in. Probably wearing the outfit Kurz had given her. The forest setting suggests that it was painted in the St. Joseph area.

Right: Detail from illustration reproduced below. The artist riding Fashion. Pen and ink sketch, dated October 1850. 10½ by 14 in. From Kurz's sketchbook. The drawings of the unidentified figures in the upper corners of the page were made on November 8, 1851, when Kurz was concerned about using every scrap of drawing surface possible.



wild animals. He decided to go to St. Joseph on the Missouri, where he was sure he would find "Indians enough."

Kurz left St. Louis on April 5, 1848, arriving at the frontier town on the 18th. Here were mountain men. Here were Potawatomies, Foxes, Kickapoos, Otoes. He came to be on friendly terms with Iowas living in a village three miles out of town. The men, he noted, "wear very little clothing; in midsummer, with the exception of the breechcloth and blanket, they wear no clothes at all. So I had at last my long-desired opportunity to study the antique from living models."

He visited an Indian village where he watched

some young men racing American horses they had just bought. "These beautifully formed savages riding bareback in a horse race along the sandy river shore I thought as fine a sight as the Grecian horsemen at the Parthenon." He was wholly enthusiastic. "Forms more beautiful than these among the Iowa Indians I cannot imagine, though I have been accustomed during my studies from life for many years to all that is finest in the human form."

To one beautiful form the romantic young man became particularly attached. In January 1850 he married, Indian fashion, Witthae, the seventeen-year-old daughter of the Iowa chief. He gave her a complete new outfit:





"I bought the usual short shirt or blouse of red calico, a woolen underskirt and pantalettes, a red blanket, a choice of large pearl beads for necklaces, and many colored bands for her hair and for her costume. Later I bought wool for knitting and smaller beads for girdle and garters." But not many weeks later, on returning home, Kurz discovered that the girl, lonely at being separated from her people, had walked out on him. "That was the end of my romantic dream of love and marriage with an Indian. Brief joy!"

With the girl gone, St. Jo was spoiled for Kurz. He had accomplished much there: his port-

folio was fattened with many portraits and group scenes. But in April 1850 he moved up to Savannah, Missouri, fourteen miles upriver. It was this summer that he bought his favorite mare, Fashion, (see previous page) the subject of many a sketch. Now he planned a speculation in horses which would take him to Salt Lake City the next year and on the way back would allow him to attend a proposed treaty-making at Fort Laramie. However, he had bad luck with some of his horses and the scheme fell through when his partner backed out.



Upper left: Omaha Buffalo Dance. Pen and ink. Titled and dated June 6, 1851. It will be noted that the sketch differs in some details from the scene reported in the Journal. Kurz has placed the action out of doors, omitted the figure of Fontanelle, and has put carefully drawn mitasses (leggings) on two of the dancing figures. The background is very much like the sketch of the Omaha village which Kurz had made on May 20, 1851 (Bulletin 115, plate 39-B).

Above: Departure of Traders from Fort Berthold. Watercolor. 20 1/4 x 15 in. Signed Fried. Kurz, dated August 1854. Details of building construction are sufficiently like those in some of the Fort Berthold sketches to allow identification of the place. The scene is one that Kurz composed to illustrate the life of traders.

Lower left: Minnetaries on the Upper Missouri. Watercolor. 20 1/4 x 13 1/2 in. Signed, lower right, Fritz Kurz. Another of his excellent compositions completed in Berne. The picture in general is based on a pencil sketch, dated August 17, 1851, to be seen in Bulletin 115, plate 14-A. The central group of the man and the horse is also featured in a sketch dated July 17, 1851 in Bulletin 115, plate 33-A. The river is the Missouri near Fort Berthold.

Instead, in May 1851 he went farther up the Missouri to Council Bluffs where he stayed for a time at the Belle Vue trading post of Peter A. Sarpy and thus had an excellent chance to study Otoes and Omahas. Among other little adventures, he rode one day with Joseph La Fleche (the father of Francis La Fleche, the ethnologist) to witness a buffalo dance around a wounded man named Fontanelle.

"The dance of the buffalo troop was held in a large, roomy clay hut. Ten dancers arranged in pairs imitated, in the most natural manner, the way that buffaloes drink, the way they wallow, how they jostle and horn one another, how they bellow—and all the while the performers sprinkle the wounded man with water. All the dancers were decorated with buffalo masks and buffalo tails fastened to their belts in the back. With the exception of the never-failing breechcloth

they were nude. A throng of people looked on. Only the 'jongleur' or Indian doctor danced alone, and without mask and tail." He continued to sketch portraits, paying fifty cents to each sitter or making a present of some kind.

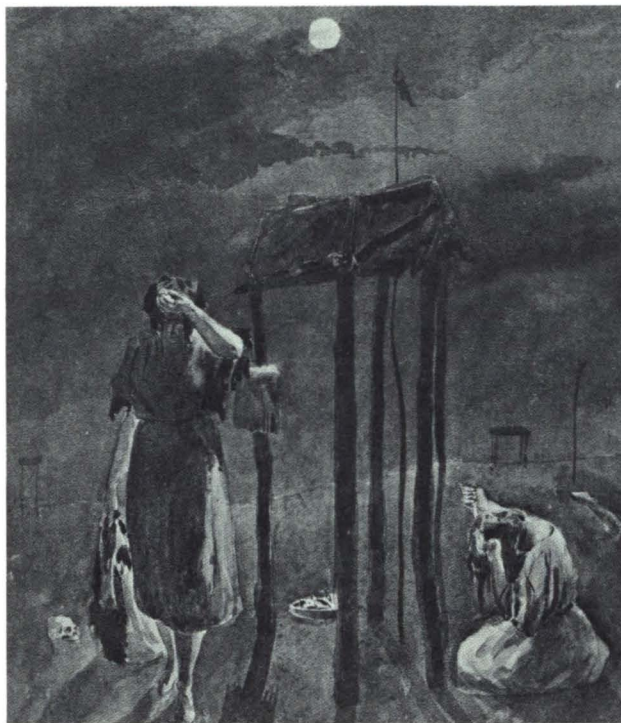
In mid-June Kurz met Alexander Culbertson and Honoré Picotte of the American Fur Company and took passage on the steamboat St. Ange headed for the forts on the upper river. Picotte's clerk died of cholera, and Kurz, offered his place, accepted with alacrity, for here at last was the grand opportunity he had longed for. On the Fourth of July they came in sight of Fort Pierre.

"I sketched the fort and the settlement from the deck of the St. Ange."

On July 7 he wrote in his journal: "Today for the first time I have seen buffaloes . . . We came upon several buffalo bulls on a sand bank. . . . One was killed; he ran quite a distance, however, before he fell dead. By means of a long rope he was pulled on to the deck by the engagees with loud hurrah and immediately quartered. Then I had my first buffalo steak."

On the next day at Fort Clark, with the aid of his telescope, he had "an interesting view of about 50 girls and women bathing. As they thought themselves well concealed they were sportive and animated in a natural way. There were several dainty figures among them. . . ."

Kurz learned on the 9th that he was to be posted under James Kipp at Fort Berthold in the Mandan country, where they had just arrived. He was well content. "What I saw and heard today (July 10, 1851) offers me a rich harvest of sketches. In the neighborhood in which I now spend my days is an Indian village of 80 clayhuts surrounded by palisades and frequented by billiard players, idle lookers-on, horse traders, and Indians engaged in their daily tasks."



Indian Women Mourning. Watercolor. 10 x 13½ in. The scaffold with the medicine pouch hanging from it and the position of the mourner on the left are based on the sketch dated July 28, 1851, August 30, 1851, reproduced in Bulletin 115, plate 46-A. The women are the mother and the wife of the Mandan, Le Boeuf Court Queue.

One day a Mandan was killed by a raiding enemy. The body was brought back to the village and preparations were made for the funeral: "a scaffold was constructed on four stakes held together with crossbeams. Upon this structure the fallen Mandan, attired after the manner of Indian warriors was wrapped in his robe, and was laid beneath the covering of a new red blanket. His medicine pouch was fastened to one of the posts. The crowd dispersed—only his widow and his mother remained to wail."

His eagerness to sketch got the artist into trouble at Fort Berthold. He had been warned that the Mandans and the Minnetaries regarded drawing and painting as "bad medicine." He did not, therefore, ask any to pose for him, but the Indians knew that he was making sketches covertly. Cholera, however, had broken out on the St. Ange on the way upriver and sickness was spreading through the village. Of all those around the fort—whites, halfbloods, Indians—only Kurz was untouched by any illness. To quiet the superstitious fears of the Indians, Kipp decided the painter must leave. Finally on September 1, he was sent with one companion overland to Fort Union, where he arrived four days later. Here Kurz was to live for the next eight months, eventually having perhaps as much experience of life at a trading post as he could possibly desire.

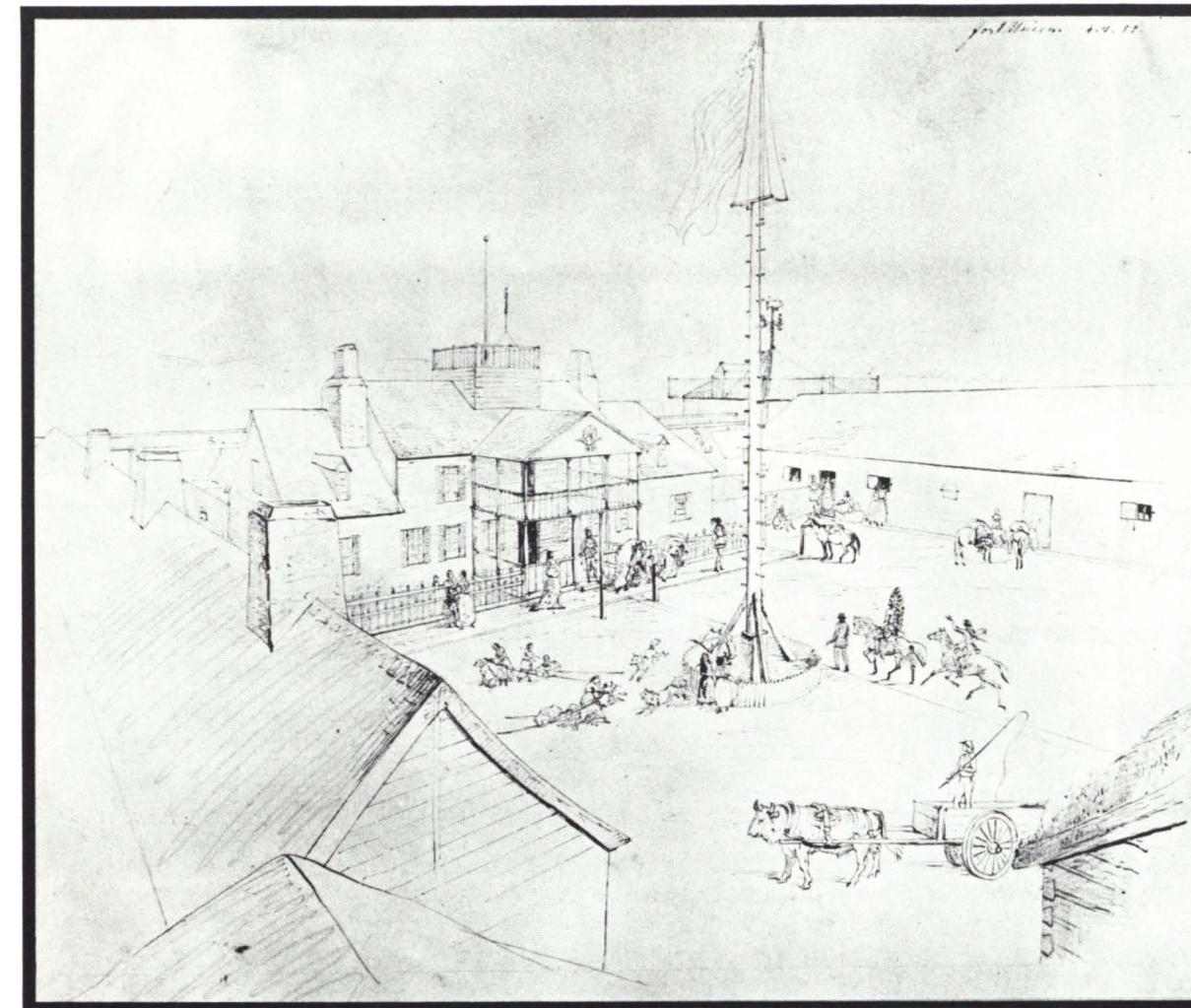
"Since I came here," he wrote not long after his arrival, "I seem to be at perfect peace with myself. In the first place, I am quite unexpectedly

so much nearer the accomplishment of my life purpose that I have little to worry about. My youthful dreams of journeyings in strange lands, of horses, of Indian women, and collections of Indian rarities I have enjoyed in reality. If I can spend my later life in the painting of pictures that portray the American Indian, if time and strength remain to me until I have realized my ideal, then my cherished aims will have been fulfilled."

At first Edwin T. Denig, the bourgeois, gave him many chores with the brush, ranging from painting the exterior of the house to doing a portrait of Pierre Chouteau, Jr., President of the Company, from a medal. He produced a life-sized picture of an eagle on cloth, to which alternating strips of red and white, fifteen feet long, were attached to form a standard which could be traded for twenty buffalo robes. This eagle, Kurz declared, was his first oil painting since he had left home five years before (he was to prepare a number of these banners that winter). He sketched the interior of Fort Union for the bourgeois.

He painted his dog, Matoh (Bear), and a life-size, knee-length portrait of Denig with which the "old man" was "perfectly delighted." Particularly pleased was the boss when his wives exclaimed that wherever they stood the picture looked constantly at them. "What witchcraft is this!" they marveled.

Kurz's stock with the bourgeois was now high. "Since his portrait has proved such a success



Mr. Denig takes much more interest in my ideas concerning a collection of pictures of Indian life. He is now convinced, also, that I have a sufficient ability to execute them in the proper way. He approves my plan: six landscapes (forest, prairie, river, coulee, a view in perspective crags); six animal pieces (buffalo, bear, elk, stag, antelope, horse); six scenes from Indian life (the dance, sport, combat, family, hunt, a group by a council fire). "Only they must be large, very large," he said, "small pictures produce no effect."

Interior of Fort Union. Pen and ink. Essentially the same but a slightly more extensive view of the interior of the fort from the southwest bastion as that reproduced in Bulletin 115, plate 13-A. The arrangement of interesting detail in the courtyard suggests that Kurz was here developing a composition representative of life in a trading fort. Note over the balcony the portrait of Chouteau, completed on October 1, 1851. The ox in the foreground, harnessed to the cart, is from a sketch dated October 30, 1851 (Bulletin 115, plate 7-B).



Left: *Indians and Horses Crossing a River*. Watercolor. 13½ x 10 in. A scene on October 7, 1851, recorded in the Journal.

Below: *The Cree Chief, Le Tout Piqué, at Fort Union*. Pen and ink. Titled and dated October 19, 1851. There is no mention in the Journal of a sketch being made on this occasion (and indeed, as reported, he could not have made one), though he may have done so immediately after the close of the meeting. This picture must rather be the design for a composition which he expected to develop as one of his principal pictures and a very good choice of subject it would have been. Note the eagle banner on the left wall, the antlered head over the mantle (a part of Kurz's decoration of the room), the roughed in three-quarter length portrait of Denig on the far wall. The two women seated on the floor behind Denig are certainly his wives. The dog in the foreground is Match, who died later that fall. The seated white man between Denig and Battiste is the artist.

One day in mid-October the Cree chief Le Tout Piqué came into the fort. Earlier Kurz had painted the presentation to him "a flat pipe-stem white and blue in alternating fields, and in the four white fields a buffalo, a wolf, an owl, and a bear."

The time had come for the ceremonial smoking of this pipe for the first time. In the reception room Denig sat in an arm chair, with Battiste, the interpreter, seated beyond him.

On the floor beside Denig "lay a beautiful buffalo robe. Against the walls braves of both bands were squatting in close rows. Rassade au Cou, Bras Casse, and one other were seated on a sofa. In front of them and directly opposite Mr. Denig stood Le Tout Piqué... With much dignity of port Piquenow came forward, put the handsome buffalo robe about Mr. Denig's shoulders, and, holding the new peace pipe in his right hand, offered us his left in greeting.

The series of mischances which had seemed to dog the Swiss artist in his career had but aided him to arrive at his goal, he wrote, by forcing him to struggle on in spite of disappointments.

"For lack of money I had to leave Paris and go back to Berne; owing to the death of old Fallenberg I failed to get a pleasant position as instructor in his famous institute; failing to sell my paintings, I became convinced that a man could not earn his livelihood as artist in Berne, not in all Switzerland, where political affairs absorb all man's faculties, all expedients, all lofty thoughts, where one looks upon art as luxury, for the simple reason that one has no taste for it. But for bilious fever I should still be in St. Joseph; but for bad luck with my horses I should now be in Savannah or Deseret; but for cholera I should still be at Fort Berthold. I shall be obliged to leave this post, because I am superfluous here. This is my good fortune... If I were a fatalist I should be forced to the conclusion that I was predestined to produce a

collection of picturesque scenes in what was formerly called the Far West..."

But though he feared now that he would not be allowed to stay long at Fort Union he was ever busy, ever studying. With the aid of his telescope he was able to watch the preparations an Indian made to cross the river with his horses and his wife.

"By means of dried buffalo hide they formed a sort of flatboat on which they placed the saddles and their personal belongings and to which they fastened a long cord. While he was carrying the skin boat and leading his horse into the water his woman, screened by her own nag, stripped herself naked and, driving the horses before her to the river brink, gave over her own clothes to her husband, who thrust them underneath their goods and chattels. Then, with powerful strokes, he started over, holding between his teeth his horse's leather lariat and the long cord with which he pulled the boat after him. His wife followed, guiding her nag in the same manner."



A page from the Sketchbook in the Historical Museum at Berne. 10½ x 14 in. The pen and ink drawings are variously dated from November 6 to November 27, 1851.

Then, grasping his robe with his right hand, he took two steps backward and began his speech."

Mr. Denig replied, whereupon "a distinguished brave lighted the pipe and gravely extended it toward the bourgeois. Each of us took several whiffs with becoming seriousness, and then the soldier proffered it to his chief, who had remained standing erect and dignified in the same place where he had stood while addressing the assemblage. He took the peace pipe in his hands, held it aloft, and then lowered it, pointing with the tip of the stem toward the earth, toward sunrise and sunset, smoked himself, and returned the pipe to the master of ceremonies. . . . The pipe bearer next invited the assembled braves to smoke, each according to his rank, a ticklish business." Such a scene would appeal to any graphic reporter of life beyond the frontier.

The first clash with Denig came about a month after Kurz's arrival at Fort Union. The boss walked in one day while the artist was working on a sketch of his "dream," his ideal female form, his Eve.

"I was just hanging some forms on the trees, in whose shade Marina is lost in thought, when Mr. D. came in & told me he wished to have my dreams painted for the saloon (reception room) . . . I told him it was my masterpiece, the land-

scape a real Eden, & she my beau ideal, the likeness of which is perfect, the only one that ever satisfied me in face, body, expression together. I would never expose her to profane eyes. . . . But he did not see anything else but a beautiful woman with well shaped limbs. Any other naked woman would do for him."

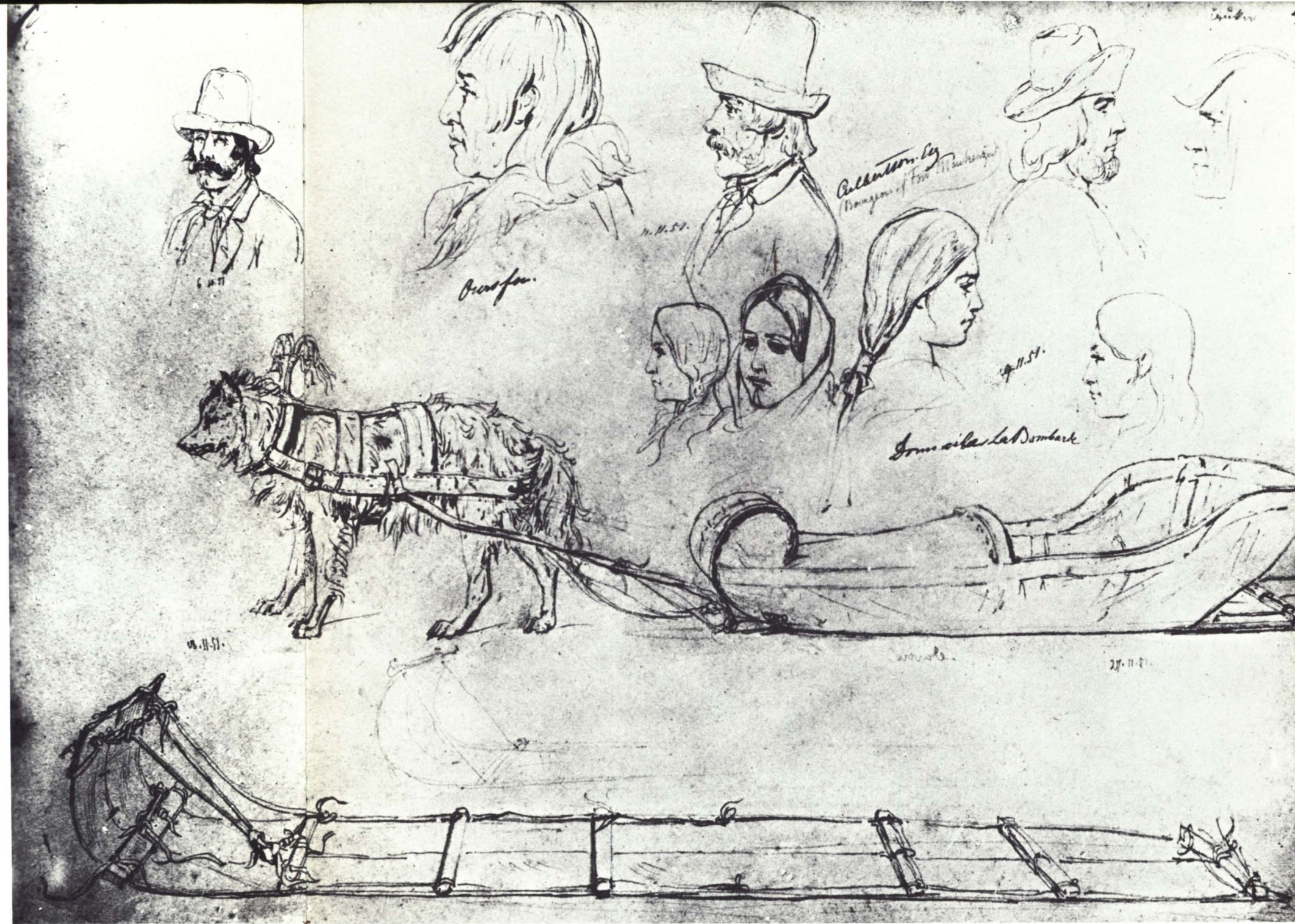
Kurz compromised by painting a half-nude of a "white woman after her bath." When visiting Indians were shown the picture, "they looked

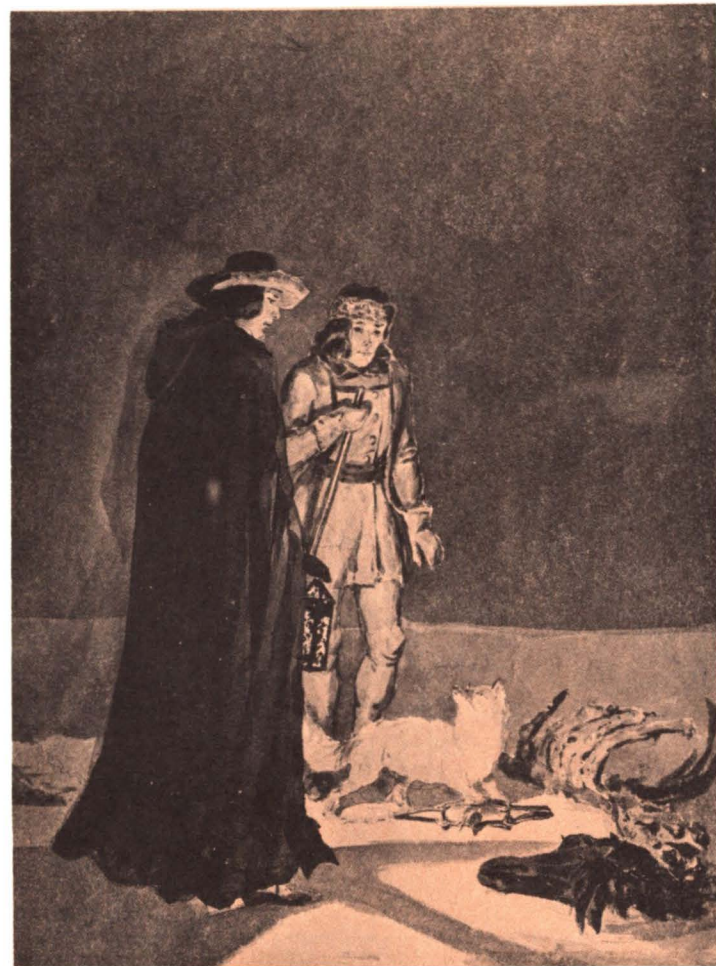
all ways to see her move, stepped up closer, tried to look under her dress, and were dissatisfied not to see all."

Throughout the winter Kurz continued to make "a sketch of every little thing that I shall use later on in paintings representative of life in this region."

A single page in his sketchbook is covered with a profile drawing of Ours Fou, the Assiniboin chief, two bust sketches of Alexander

Culbertson who had come down from Fort MacKenzie for a business visit (and whose portrait Kurz painted at this time), four views of the head of Domicila La Bombarde, wife of one of the engagees at Fort Union, an Indian sled, and a cariole to which was harnessed a wolfhound with bells on—Denig was proposing to drive in tandem during the snowy season a team of three dogs drawing this single-passenger cariole painted black and red by the Swiss.





Left: *Fox Caught in a Trap*. Watercolor. 10 x 13½ in. A night scene reminiscent of an incident entered in the Journal, October 25, 26, 1851.

Right: *The Falling Spring, near Prairie du Rocher*. Watercolor. 13¼ x 16¼ in. Painted in the summer of 1852 before the artist's departure from St. Louis for Europe.

Below: *Hunter with Horse Beside Dead Buffalo*. Watercolor. 13½ x 10¾ in. It is not impossible that this represents Kurz in the new calfskin winter suit that he had Madame La Bombarde make for him at Fort Union. There is no facial resemblance—but this is obviously an unfinished sketch.

their good fortune and bad, their travels, their work, dangers they face on water and land, in heat and in frost, in a region of redskins and wild beasts—are not all these matters of exceeding interest?"

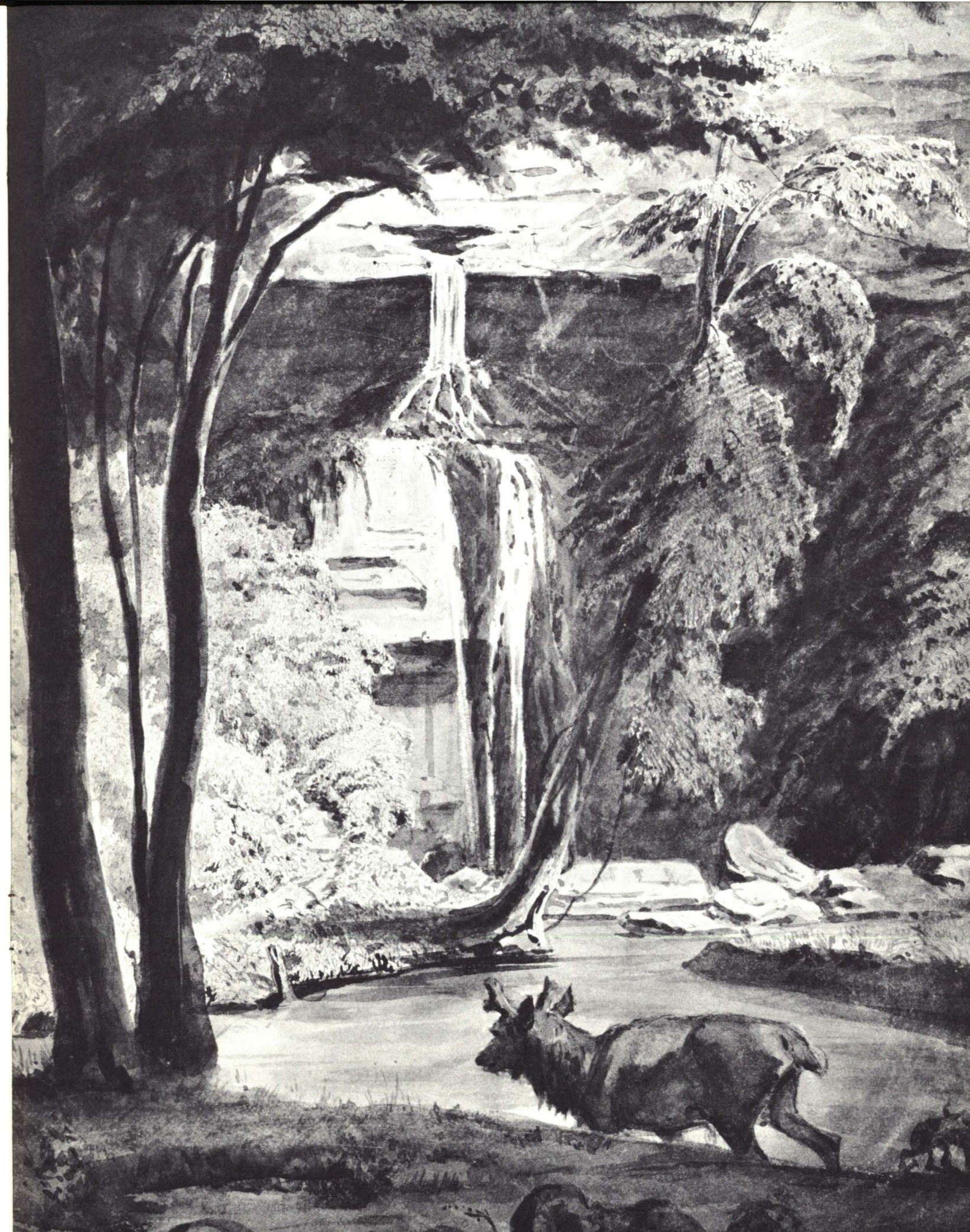
By the middle of April he could say that he was "in possession of the studies" which he needed for the fulfillment of the dream he had treasured for twenty years.

"The scientific part of my work I have now accomplished; aesthetic execution remains to be done. Up to this time I have devoted myself more to study; I have as yet executed but few paintings. . . . My studies in America include such a great number as well as such a various assortment that to choose what I shall paint will be no easy matter. Where shall I begin? My head is crammed full of it all."

Kurz went out one night with an engagee to see and paint a fox caught in a trap. On other occasions he pictured a white hunter standing beside a dead buffalo, a stag at the river's edge, a family of bears in a cave, Indian women carrying bundles of wood and driving dogs dragging travois loaded with wood.

The supply of paints gave out. Denig lost interest in the sketches and set Kurz to regular duties as a clerk and sometimes made life difficult for him. But the young man had plenty of time to observe the Indians, plenty to think about, plenty of subjects human, animal, and artifacts to sketch.

"My studies progress slowly, yet they steadily increase. Indeed, they are becoming so abundant that my first plan for a collection," he wrote in January 1852, "begins to seem impractical, that is, too limited. Which pictures shall I paint? which omit? Besides, there is the life of the fur traders, the mountaineers, and the half-breeds, their hunting expeditions, their adventures, their pleasures and their sufferings, their amours,





Top: Stag at the Edge of a River. Watercolor. 13 x 7¼ in. Either painted at Fort Union or from sketches made there. Typical of Kurz's animal studies.

Bottom: Bears in a Cave. Watercolor. 16 x 13½ in. Another picture done at Fort Union or based on sketches made there in the winter of 1851-1852.

On the 19th of April he left Fort Union to make the journey downriver with Culbertson in a mackinaw boat. On the 25th they reached Fort Berthold, on May 3 Fort Pierre, Council Bluffs on the 11th. During dinner at Belle Vue he saw by chance his former wife Witthae, who "expected I would speak to her . . . but I am not the man to offer my hand once more to one who had deserted me as she had done."

The next evening he was in St. Joseph where he visited until the 21st. Four days later he was in St. Louis at the Virginia Hotel kept by J. Sparr of Basel. He had been suffering from dropsy on the trip down and now stayed for some time to recuperate. Occasionally he wandered over to his favorite woodland scenery on the Cahokia River and one day he painted in water color the Falling Spring in the bluffs south of Prairie du Rocher.

By August he was well enough to travel, but he had exhausted what little money he had, and in order to get home to Europe he faced the fact that he would have "to part with a large portion of my valuable collection . . . of Indian apparel, weapons, and ornaments" on which he had been spending his salary while at Fort Berthold and Fort Union. Some of the objects he sold in St. Louis, some in New York. At last, on September 24 he was once more in Berne with his family.

Home and recovered from an ague which had struck him on the point of departure from New York—cured after months of sickness by the "motherly care and assistance of my beloved sisters and brother"—he was again confronted by the problem of what to do with the rich materials for a life work that he had brought home to Switzerland.

Should the culmination be a gallery for exhibition purposes? a series of paintings to be lithographed or engraved for sale as prints? a richly illustrated book? For any of these a wealthy

patron must be found to bear major expenses. In the meantime—though he had ample confidence in himself—his dreams of success were but sketches in his portfolio. He still needed time and concentrated effort to produce paintings that would win him the recognition and help he must have.

On September 22, 1852, at Fort Union he had written: "Several most interesting compositions are taking shape in my brain. I begin to realize that my first plan for a gallery of paintings from Indian life is too restricted in scope: I must extend the bounds I had set, and arrange for a large collection of pictures."

He now set himself to work in Berne and on October 11, 1856, he summed thus his labors and his situation:

"After four years of strenuous work I finished last month the collection mentioned above, but for the most part only in sketches . . . with the hope of interesting some art dealer in a foreign country.

"The time was unfavorable for my undertaking, owing to the wars in the East, and I see now that my project included too large a number of pictures. I was retarded, moreover, in my efforts to execute the paintings rapidly by having my head so overcrowded with ideas. Having met with refusals from several art dealers, I decided to paint for sale several works in water color and in oil to defray my living expenses. Things went badly enough.

"In the first place, Indian life is of no interest to the public in Switzerland; furthermore, audacious critics, ignorant of the subject, went so far as to contend that my pictures were not true to life—as if I would have devoted 6 years to a genre merely for the sake of indulging fancies in the end. To be sure I could have followed here the example of Neu Wied and Catlin in their works. This year I have been particularly unfortunate with my Indian collection, but as

Two Indian Women Crossing a River. Watercolor. 13½ x 10 in. Another unfinished painting and one that Kurz may well have abandoned, for the bullboat rides unconvincingly high out of the water and the near figure has two heads. The building on the bluff in the right background is Fort Berthold; the river is the Missouri.

I have now the position of drawing master and shall be henceforth, I trust, independent of a public composed of pendants, I am determined to complete my collection of paintings from Indian life, at least, in outline.

"This accomplishment relieves my mind in a twofold sense: In the first place, I now feel that, come what may, my journey shall not have been made in vain, and, secondly, my brain is no longer burdened with so many crowding pictures. . . . finding comfort in the progress I have made thus far, I look forward to the future with hope that, without neglecting the duties of my position, I shall be able to devote myself still further to my ideals, giving no thought to the public with its petty formalism."

Part of his time during these years Kurz must have been devoting to the account of his American experiences, which he was preparing for publication but which remained in manuscript until the Bureau of American Ethnology printed it in translation in its Bulletin 115 in 1937. No firm date can be assigned to the manuscript in German as it is found today in the Historical Museum of Berne; but it is clear that in the enlargement of his diaries and in his discussions of Indians and animals of the Far West, Kurz consulted works as recently published as Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's *Indian Tribes of the United States* (1851-1857). And we note, of course, that the passage just quoted, written October 11, 1856, was a footnote in the manuscript.

How many pictures Kurz had completed by October, 1856, and how many more he finished in the remaining fifteen years of his life, cannot be determined. Two or three dozen are known today in Swiss museums. Probably some others rest in private possession there and in the United States.

Of collections in America the largest group is that gathered by the late Thomas Gilcrease and now to be seen in the Gilcrease Institute of

American History and Art in Tulsa. These eighteen watercolor, wash, and pen and ink sketches (all reproduced here) form an interesting sampling of the work of Kurz, illustrative of his achievement and of his deficiencies. He was not a great artist; had he lived twenty years longer and finished ten times as many watercolors, he would still not have won the position he longed for. He could seldom recapture in watercolor what he had recorded so sharply in pencil.

But if he did not measure up to his dreams, if he was not able for whatever reasons to paint the superb gallery of Indian life he had envisioned, he nevertheless made an invaluable contribution to our knowledge of that life through the journal of his experiences, his observations up the Missouri River, and the hundreds of faithful genre studies he made of men and objects in that region. The portrait sketches of Indians and traders, his colorful representations of Indian encampments, the skillful reporting of a buffalo dance, the almost photographically accurate detail of the courtyard of a great fur trading fort, the solemn dignity of a "talk" between an Indian chief and a bourgeois, the grief of mourning women, the simple but vivid scene of the preparations for taking horses across a river—the man who left such records of the frontier could well be proud of his accomplishment.

NOTE: The two illustrations on page 7 and 15 are reproduced from photographs furnished by the Office of Anthropology (formerly the Bureau of American Ethnology) of the Smithsonian Institution from the originals in the Historical Museum of Berne. All other illustrations are from the collection of the artist's work in the Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art. All details of the life of Kurz and all quotations are from the *Journal of Rudolph Friedrich Kurz*, published in 1937 by the Bureau of American Ethnology as its Bulletin 115.

