Henry Vianden: Pioneer Artist in Milwaukee

In the year 1849 Milwaukee was a fast-growing frontier city. About a third of the city's twenty thousand residents were immigrants from Germany, a proportion that was to remain stable for the rest of the century. The Milwaukee of 1849 was a city of unpaved streets and buildings of mostly single-story wood construction. Cultural life was limited and there were few opportunities for a professional artist to earn a living. Nonetheless, a few portrait artists had settled in the city by this time. Among these were two Scotsmen, Burnard Durward and George Robertson, and the English-born Samuel Marsden Brookes. All three of these artists eventually left Milwaukee, Brookes and Durward leaving in 1862. Henry Vane Thorne, a young English gentleman, had arrived in 1847. He produced landscapes of local scenery and founded a drawing class, the first such enterprise in the state. His promising career came to an abrupt end, however, when he was killed in an accident a few years later.¹

In late 1849 Heinrich Vianden arrived from Germany and joined the small group of artists who had already taken up residence in Milwaukee. He was a trained professional and the first German-born artist to settle permanently in the city. Known in America as Henry Vianden, he soon began to give instruction in painting and drawing, thus filling the void left by the premature death of Henry Vane Thorne. Within a few years he was firmly established as the city's leading professional artist. Through his role as an art teacher, he had a profound influence on an entire generation of younger artists in the city. A shrewd judge of talent, he encouraged several of his best students to seek further training in Europe.

Vianden was already recognized in his own day as an outstanding local artist, a view which was reaffirmed by Porter Butts, who wrote the authoritative history of art in Wisconsin.² More recent scholarship has confirmed Vianden's position as an important early regionalist painter in the Midwest. The Milwaukee Art Center owns seven of his landscapes, at least two of which have been loaned out for inclusion in
exhibitions outside of Wisconsin. But while Vianden’s stature as an artist appears to need no reassessment, the details of his career certainly require both clarification and more extended treatment. For one thing, published discussions of Vianden’s career have largely overlooked the information available in a number of sources, including particularly public records and publications in foreign languages. This essay will seek to present an expanded view of Vianden’s life and work by drawing upon sources which have not been utilized previously.

Vianden was born 9 July 1814 at Poppelsdorf, now a part of Bonn. His parents were Wilhelm Joseph Vianden (1789-1819) and Anna Maria Vianden, née Weyh (1788-1866). Vianden’s father was a faience painter and was no doubt employed at the faience manufactory in Poppelsdorf.

Henry Vianden was an only child and only five years old when his father died.

Vianden, like his father, is reported to have had experience decorating chinaware. At the age of fourteen, however, he was apprenticed to a goldsmith. From 1836 to 1841 he was a student at the art academy in Munich. In 1844 he began to exhibit his paintings at the art association in Cologne. The same year, however, he went to Antwerp, where he spent a year and a half continuing his art education.

While in Belgium, Vianden exhibited sixteen etchings. Although the works themselves are not known to have survived, a full record of their titles and content still exists. One group of etchings depicted the seven deadly sins, each being illustrated by an episode from the Bible. For this series, Vianden collaborated with the Belgian artist Franciscus Andreas Durlet (1816-68). Of the remaining nine etchings exhibited in Belgium, all but one are also of religious subjects. The single exception was a picture of Achilles casting down Astyanax. This etching, which dates from either 1834 or 1836, is Vianden’s earliest known work.

Vianden returned to Germany in 1845. From 1846 to 1849 his name is listed in the Cologne city directories, which give his occupation as painter and report that he lived at Große Brinkgasse 11. He continued to exhibit at the Cologne art association until 1848, the year before his departure for America. Among the works which Vianden exhibited in Cologne were portraits, genre paintings, and depictions of historical events or episodes from literature. Ein Mönch am Grabe (A Monk at the Grave), exhibited in 1844, has a title reminiscent of the kind of subject preferred by Vianden’s older contemporary, Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840). Margret, exhibited in 1847, derives from a story of the same name by Gottfried Kinkel (1815-82). In Kinkel’s romantic tale a village heroine is abandoned by her inconstant lover but later reunited with him. Vianden’s works during this period also include further etchings on biblical themes and etchings which depict such allegorical subjects as The Triumph of Good and The Triumph of Evil. Interestingly enough, the work he exhibited in Cologne does not include any landscapes, although he later devoted himself almost exclusively to this type of painting.

In November 1848 Vianden was married to his first wife, Magdalena Krüppel. She was the daughter of a village physician, born in 1811 near
the town of Zülpich, about twenty miles west of Bonn. The civil marriage record indicates that Vianden was a painter by profession. He was also skilled as a lithographer and copperplate engraver, however, and he probably helped support himself by this kind of work.

Vianden and his wife left Germany in May 1849 and after a voyage of thirty-nine days arrived on 4 July 1849 in New York, where he remained for several weeks before moving on to Wisconsin. He appears to have purchased property at Burlington, Wisconsin, near Racine, but by October he had reached Milwaukee, where he appeared before the clerk of the county circuit court in order to file a declaration of intent to become a United States citizen. In December he was again in Milwaukee, this time to arrange for an exhibition of paintings which he had brought from Europe. Among these were some paintings of the 1848 Revolution in Germany, one of these depicting a street battle in Berlin. Probably this was Der Barrikadenkampf (The Battle of the Barricades), which Vianden had exhibited in Cologne the previous year. The show was held in a newly-built hall next to Matthias Stein’s gun shop on Market Square, a neighborhood which was then the center of the city’s growing German immigrant community.

Suggestions about religious or ideological factors having played a role in Vianden’s decision to leave Germany are not supported by any hard evidence, and the idea that Vianden might have been personally involved in the political unrest of 1848 was probably suggested by his paintings of the barricade battles. Nonetheless, various circumstances suggest that Vianden was more at ease among social liberals than among conservatives. For example, though nominally a Catholic, Vianden once stated that he had consented to a church wedding only for his wife’s sake, but had personally felt that the previous civil ceremony was sufficient.

By May 1850 Vianden had definitely settled in Milwaukee. He acquired a nine-acre tract of land near Root Creek on the outskirts of town where he eventually built a picturesque cottage. There was a garden and farm at his country house where he often hunted rabbits in the woods nearby, accompanied by his two red setters. The area where Vianden settled is now part of Milwaukee, but during his lifetime it lay outside the city limits. When Vianden purchased the property, it lay within the village of Greenfield, later to be known as Layton Park. The cottage, which Vianden had designed himself, was basically built to resemble a Swiss chalet. The inclusion of a veranda, however, added a suggestion of the Victorian style. Stained a brown color and decorated with carved vertical beams, it struck one observer as having the appearance of an oversized cuckoo clock. Vianden frequently gave classes in outdoor painting which were held on the grounds near his cottage. A willow tree near the house was painted by so many of his students that it came to be known as the most painted tree in Wisconsin. Vianden sold part of his land to Forest Home Cemetery, but still owned considerable property at the time of his death. His house, which was still standing in 1922, has since been demolished. Apparently it stood near the southwest corner of the cemetery.
Vianden’s base of operations in the city was a studio housed in a small store at 111 Mason Street near the corner of Broadway. The studio served as a school, workshop, and exhibition room. For years Vianden, a tall straight man with a ruddy face and robust constitution, was in the habit of walking the three miles into town almost every day.

In addition to teaching at his home and at his downtown studio, Vianden also taught drawing at two private non-sectarian schools in Milwaukee: Peter Engelmann’s German and English Academy as well as Mathilde Franziska Anneke’s German, French, and English Academy. Both Engelmann and Anneke were political liberals who had come to the United States after having been involved in the Revolution of 1848. Vianden was associated with the German and English Academy as early as 1865, when Engelmann was still principal.

Vianden’s first wife, Magdalena Krüppel, bore him four children, but all died in infancy. On 5 June 1860, after more than eleven years of marriage, Magdalena left him and returned alone to Germany. Vianden learned through friends in Germany that his wife was living with her widowed sister at Euskirchen, a town fourteen miles west of Bonn. Letters which he wrote to his wife went unanswered and on 1 November 1861 Vianden filed for divorce in the Milwaukee County Circuit Court. A final decree of divorce was granted on 15 February 1862. He was, however, required to restore to Magdalena $2,000 which he had received from her at the time of their marriage. The divorce decree stipulated the terms of repayment, one of which was that he deposit with the court deeds for land which he owned at Burlington in Racine County. In 1867 Vianden was married in a judicial ceremony to his second wife, Fredericka Wollenzien, who was born in Germany in 1837. They had no children. Fredericka died in 1897.

Several of Vianden’s students had notable careers as artists. The most successful of these was Carl Marr (1858-1936), who had been born in Milwaukee, the son of a German immigrant engraver. With Vianden’s encouragement, Marr went to study in Munich, where he eventually settled and became director of the Royal Academy of Art. Another talented student who pursued a similar career was Robert Koehler (1850-1917). Koehler, born in Hamburg and brought to Milwaukee as a child, also studied in Munich and ultimately became director of the Minneapolis School of Fine Arts.

Two other students of Vianden who came to play an important role in the Milwaukee art scene were Frank Enders (1860-1921) and Robert Schade (1861-1912). Enders was born in Milwaukee, the son of German immigrant parents. Schade, who came from a similar background, was born in New York but settled in Milwaukee at an early age. With Vianden’s encouragement, both studied in Munich; Schade from 1878 to 1882, Enders from 1879 to 1884. Although they were both at the Munich Academy at the same time, they were in different classes. Both later established studios in Milwaukee, where they had successful careers.

Not all of Vianden’s students were from the local German-American community, however. One of his most talented students was Susan
Henry Vianden, untitled landscape, oil on canvas, 26 x 19 inches. Courtesy of Robert Brue.
Stuart Frackleton (1851-1932), who studied landscape painting with Vianden but later turned her attention to china decoration. Frackleton ultimately attracted national attention both for her work as an artist and as an authority on ceramics.

After coming to the United States, Vianden largely confined his efforts to landscape painting but continued to paint a few pictures of other types. In a lottery held in 1874, thirty-six Vianden paintings were distributed to holders of winning tickets. Most of these paintings were landscapes, but there were also paintings with such titles as Grapes, Spanish Bandit, Veiled Lady, and Monk’s Head. In 1877 Vianden was commissioned to do a portrait of the deceased father of Frank Siller, a local art patron. The Milwaukee Public Library at one time reportedly owned a self-portrait by Vianden. Vianden was most famous, however, as a painter of trees. Known as the “oak tree artist,” he typically painted pictures in which a single tree occupies a prominent position at the center of the canvas.

A frequently repeated anecdote reports Vianden’s advice on how to paint a tree. The photographer Edward Steichen, who began his career in Milwaukee, gives this version of the story:

There was a landscape painter, famous in Milwaukee, who was particularly applauded for the way he painted trees. At one of his exhibitions a young lady approached him and said, “Oh, Mr. Vianden, you paint such wonderful trees. What is your secret?” And he said, “Secret? Vat is a tree? A tree is one hundred t’ousand leaves. You paint one hundred t’ousand leaves and dare you have a tree.”

During the summer Vianden often went on painting excursions in the woodlands, particularly to the Wisconsin Dells and along the Fox and Kickapoo rivers. Usually he would take along a horse and wagon, staying for the night at farm houses or village hotels. On such excursions, lasting for weeks at a time, he was often accompanied by several of his students. His landscapes were so much admired locally, that he was apparently able to make an adequate living from what he earned by farming, teaching, and the sale of his paintings. He was even able to afford two visits back to Europe. During his second trip, in 1893, he visited Italy as well as Germany.

In private life Vianden cultivated a gruff exterior. He was, as the artist Louis Mayer put it, “a sworn enemy of elegance and polite habits,” though “liberal and good natured at heart.” To his friends, the burly figure with the white beard was known as “the bear.” He was sociable, however, and enjoyed entertaining friends at his home. There he would proudly serve capons raised on his farm or game he had shot, his own asparagus, and even red-currant wine which he made himself. Toward the end of his life, he continued to go into town twice a week in order to spend time at Toser’s, a favorite Weinstube. Such meetings were typically characterized by good-natured conviviality, but the conversation could also take a philosophical turn. Vianden, well-informed, particularly with regard to history, often drew attention to parallels
Peter Woltze (1860-1925), portrait of Henry Vianden, watercolor, 1882, Milwaukee Art Museum. Woltze was a German-born artist who returned to Germany in 1900 after spending twenty years in Milwaukee. The painting is a gift of the Leidersdorf Family.
between events of his own day and those of the past. He was also fond of reading poetry.

Vianden was eighty-five when he died at his home on the evening of 5 February 1899. His death, due to pleurisy, had come after an illness lasting several weeks. Funeral arrangements were made by his friends, as his only relative in the United States was a sister of his second wife. Burial was at Forest Home Cemetery, not far from Vianden's home. His former students, Frank Enders and Robert Schade, were among the pallbearers. Norbert Becker, another pallbearer, and Frederick William von Cotzhausen, a prominent Milwaukee lawyer, politician, and writer, spoke at the funeral. There was no religious service.

Milwaukee underwent many changes during the fifty years that Vianden lived there. What had once been a frontier town had become a city of stately buildings, streetcar lines, and new housing developments. In 1888 the Layton Art Gallery was opened two blocks east of Vianden's studio. When the Milwaukee Art Association was organized the same year, Vianden was elected vice-president. Around 1895 Vianden's studio at 111 Mason Street was torn down. In its place was built the University Building, a six-story masonry structure which became the home of the Milwaukee Art Students' League and which for years provided studio space for a long list of Milwaukee artists.

Other, less immediately visible changes took place in the city's art life. For many years Vianden had been the only academically trained German-born artist in the city. After 1880, however, the situation was greatly altered by the sudden arrival of a number of professionally trained German artists who came to Milwaukee to work for the American Panorama Company. By the last decade of the century Vianden was only one among many talented professional artists in the city. Nevertheless, his death in 1899 attracted considerable attention, for he was both an early settler and a local celebrity. The fact that Vianden was for many years the only local artist represented in the permanent collection of the staid Layton Gallery is some indication of the high esteem in which he was locally held.

The style and subject matter of Vianden's paintings underwent little change during his career in America; it is unlikely, therefore, that he was much influenced either by American art at large or by changing conditions in Milwaukee. The influences which shaped Vianden's work were, on the other hand, almost entirely those to which he had been exposed before leaving Germany. The Vianden paintings which are known to have survived are mostly landscapes and provide no sharp reflection of the times in which he lived. The celebration of nature for its own sake was, however, a matter which in Vianden's time required no explanation or apology. A similar point of view can be detected in the works of the German-American poets who were Vianden's contemporaries.

Vianden was in Germany from about 1830 to 1849 serving his apprenticeship as an artist. This was a time when Romanticism still exercised a considerable influence on German art, though it was also a time of transition when artists could choose between several competing
schools of painting. Painters like Moritz von Schwind sought to carry forward the Romantic tradition while others, like Carl Spitzweg, devoted themselves to genre painting and cultivated a Biedermeier outlook. The German art academies at the time tended to favor religious and historical subjects executed on a grand scale. Landscape painting at that time was developing away from Romanticism in the direction of an increasingly realistic style, a fact which was certainly a major influence on Vianden’s work. It was also a period during which the Düsseldorf Academy was at the height of its prestige and had not yet been overshadowed by the academy at Munich. The qualities of meticulous detail which were the hallmark of the Düsseldorf style were still much in vogue and were able to reach Vianden even in Munich. The influence of the Düsseldorf tradition is clearly reflected in Vianden’s painting, even though he was never directly a part of the art colony there. For one thing, the academy at Düsseldorf strongly encouraged landscape painting. More significantly, however, Vianden never abandoned the principles of careful photographic realism which he evidently absorbed from the influence of the Düsseldorf school. The five years which Vianden spent at the Munich Academy coincided with the period when the director of the academy was Peter von Cornelius, who had previously been director of the Düsseldorf Academy. It is possible, however, to exaggerate the influence which Cornelius may have had on Vianden’s work. The large narrative frescoes which absorbed the talents of Cornelius have, in fact, little in common with Vianden’s landscapes.

In conclusion, it is appropriate to ask what kind of critical standing Vianden is likely to have in the future. The same qualities of meticulous detail which were so much admired in Vianden’s youth were already being called into question during his mature years, and for most of our own century the hard, precise Düsseldorf style has been out of favor with art critics. But the last twenty years have witnessed an ongoing reappraisal of both American and German painting from the period in which Vianden lived, so that Vianden’s contribution to American art will probably receive increasingly sympathetic attention from future art historians.

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Notes

1 Porter Butts, Art in Wisconsin (Madison: The Madison Art Association, 1936), 70-81.
2 Ibid., 109-13. Vianden’s painting, The Old Oak, is reproduced on p. 111. This painting, which was in the collection of the Milwaukee Journal Gallery from 1927 to 1958, has since been acquired by the Milwaukee Art Center.
3 View of the Fox River, Wisconsin was included in an exhibition held in Boston in 1975-76, while Landscape with Palisades Along the River was part of an 1977 exhibition at the St. Louis Art Museum. Both pictures were produced in the catalogs of these exhibitions: Anneliese Harding, America Through the Eyes of German Immigrant Painters (Boston: Goethe House Boston, 1975-76), 35 and 72; Judith A. Barker and Lynn E. Springer, Currents of Expansion: Painting in the Midwest, 1820-1940 (St. Louis: The St. Louis Art Museum, 1977),
104 and 175. *View of the Fox River, Wisconsin* was also loaned to the Henry Ford Museum at Dearborn, Michigan, for inclusion in a 1944 exhibition “The Arts and Crafts of the Old Northwest Territory.” Other museums will, in all probability, eventually acquire works by Vianden for their permanent collections. For example, the West Bend Gallery of Fine Arts in West Bend, Wisconsin, is now trying to acquire works by pre-1950 Wisconsin artists, including Vianden.

4 Information on Vianden’s parents is to be found in the following public documents: (1) Vianden’s birth certificate (Geburtsurkunde No. 192/1814, Standesamt Poppelsdorf), (2) the civil record of Vianden’s first marriage (Heiratsurkunde No. 732/1848, Standesamt Köln), (3) the death certificate of Vianden’s mother (Sterbeurkunde No. 65/1866, Standesamt Poppelsdorf), and (4) the civil record of Vianden’s second marriage (Milwaukee Registration of Marriages, 2:490).

5 In Vianden’s birth certificate his father’s occupation is given as “painter.” In the civil record of Vianden’s first marriage, his father’s occupation is reported as “faience painter.” The faience manufactory at Poppelsdorf was established in 1755 and was in operation throughout the nineteenth century. For information about it, see Konrad Hüseler, *Deutsche Fayencen: Ein Handbuch der Fabriken, ihrer Meister und Werke* (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1956), 1:65-66.


12 Vianden was married to Magdalena Francisca Wilhelmina Krüppel in a civil ceremony which took place on 29 November 1848. She had been born at Nemmenich, near Züllich, on 27 July 1811, the daughter of Johann Wilhelm Krüppel and his wife, Maria Aloysia Josephine Christina Nonn.


14 Lydia Ely, “Art and Artists in Milwaukee,” in *History of Milwaukee*, ed. Howard Louis Conard (Chicago and New York: American Biographical Publishing Company, 1895), 2:76. That Vianden arrived in New York in July 1849 is also explicitly stated in a declaration of intent to become a U.S. citizen which Vianden filed in Milwaukee later that year. Merlo, 899-900, also reports that Vianden left Germany for America in 1849. Butts’ claim that Vianden left Germany in 1844 is apparently mistaken. Butts, whose source of information was Vianden’s passport, evidently confused the artist’s departure for Belgium in 1844 with his later departure for America (Butts, 110 and 167). The notion that Vianden could have departed for America as early as 1844 is furthermore invalidated by the documentary evidence that Vianden’s first marriage took place in Germany in 1848.


16 Rudolf Koss, *Milwaukee* (Milwaukee: Schnellpressen-Druck des Herold, 1871), 291. *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 8 December 1849, p. 2. Koss states that some of the pictures were not by Vianden, while the *Sentinel* reported that all of the paintings were his own work.

17 Merlo, 491.

18 Butts, 110. Walter Osten [pseudonym of Theodore Mueller], “The Father of the Milwaukee Painters,” *The Milwaukee Turner* 5, no. 7 (July 1942): 1-2. Mueller’s assertion that Vianden played an active part in the 1848 Revolution is without source and unverifiable. Vianden’s name does not appear in relevant sources such as Josef Hansen
and Heinz Boberich, *Rheinische Briefe und Akten zur Geschichte der politischen Bewegung 1830-1850* (Cologne and Bonn: Gesellschaft für Rheinische Geschichtskunde, 1876).

20 *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 1 February 1899, p. 5.
22 Information concerning Vianden’s sale of land to Forest Home Cemetery was provided by George H. Wilcox, president of Forest Home. Mr. Wilcox believes that Vianden’s house probably stood at what is now a vacant lot between 27th and 28th streets. The place is just east of St. Luke’s Hospital, which was built in 1952.

24 Ely, 76.
26 *Milwaukee Journal*, 6 February 1899, p. 4. Fredericka is buried with her husband at Forest Home Cemetery, where records indicate that she was born in Germany on 24 or 25 July 1837 and that she died at Greenfield, Wisconsin, on 24 April 1897.
32 *Evening Wisconsin* (Milwaukee), 1 February 1899, p. 3.
33 *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 5 April 1903, pt. 5, p. 10.
34 Milwaukee Writers’ Project, *History of Milwaukee County* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Public Library, 1947), 379.
36 *Evening Wisconsin* (Milwaukee), 1 February 1899, p. 3.
40 One of these younger artists, Hermann Michalowski, is reported to have painted Vianden’s portrait. The portrait, at one time owned by Vianden, was donated during his lifetime to a Milwaukee museum. (Hense-Jensen and Bruncken, 1902, 2:48-49.) The present whereabouts of this picture could not be ascertained. There is, however, a watercolor portrait of Vianden in the Milwaukee Art Museum which was done in 1882 by the German-born artist Peter Woltze.
41 *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 5 April 1903, pt. 5, p. 10.
42 The sole exception is the painting *Westward Ho*, which is basically a landscape but which incorporates genre elements. This painting was offered for sale a few years ago by Berry-Hill Galleries, a private dealer in New York. The painting was reproduced in a half-page advertisement which appeared in *Antiques* 106, no. 1 (July 1974): 73.
43 For many years the Düsseldorf Academy was the only major art school in Germany which offered a curriculum in landscape painting. Another outgrowth of this interest was the establishment in 1827 of the Association for Landscape Composition by two Düsseldorf artists, Karl Friedrich Lessing and Johann Wilhelm Schirmer.