

113 Peter Rindisbacher

1806 – 1834

A Métis Man and His Two Wives

watercolour and ink on watermarked wove paper:
B&R 1822, on verso stamped, circa 1824
6 ½ × 8 ¼ in, 16.5 × 21 cm

PROVENANCE

By descent to the present Private Collection, Australia

PETER RINDISBACHER WAS born in 1806 in Eggiwil, canton of Berne, Switzerland.[1] In 1821, at age 15, he immigrated with his large farming family, via Hudson Bay, to Lord Selkirk's Red River Settlement, in the heart of British North America (present-day Manitoba). On an "immigrants arrival list" he had boldly declared his occupation to be "dessinateur" (draughtsman) with a brimming portfolio.

At age 12, Rindisbacher's talents had blossomed under the tutelage of Swiss printmaker Jakob Samuel Weibel (1771 – 1846) in Berne. He had studied drawing and painting in the field with his master and developed a deft hand in the studio production and colouring of popular outline-etchings of Swiss landscapes and of regional customs, manners and costumes of Swiss inhabitants, which directly informed his work in North America.[2] Comparisons of teacher and apprentice works in a biography of Weibel reveal their perfect alignment of subject, composition, scale, manner and colouring.[3]

Rindisbacher successfully promoted his art in Red River, satisfying numerous requests for specific subjects, of which he painted "variants" by tracing and transposing identical figures in slightly altered configurations and settings with varied light and shadows. Several of his popular subjects were reproduced as colour lithographs, printed in London in 1826. The cover-sheet inscription confirmed Rindisbacher's "Swiss manner" approach: "Views … illustrative of the Customs, Manners, and Costumes of those Tribes of North American Indians …." Weibel's artistic training and business acumen showed Rindisbacher that portrayals of his arctic voyage and new North American experiences could prove lucrative locally, and in North American and European printmaking culture.

Prior to his departure from Switzerland, Rindisbacher had likely been commissioned to create depictions of his North Atlantic crossing, now held at Library & Archives Canada. The album, now unbound, includes rare watercolours of several Indigenous family groups that he encountered among the Inuit, Saulteaux and Cree First Nations, among others. He also depicted two Métis families of combined First Nations and European descent, one in the collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery (figure 1) and another presented here, *A Métis Man and His Two Wives* (lot 113).

Not intended as individual portraits, the figures are representatives of Red River Métis society, distinguished by their particular relationships and aspects of material culture. The latter image, representing two wives, is a much rarer depiction of the complex polygamous Métis social reality, which incorporated women and children within many Indigenous communities in North America. This practice would later be discouraged by evangelizing colonists, who would also introduce residential schools to disrupt Métis life.

Rindisbacher presents the Métis family, with husband, two wives and infant, in classical simplicity and quiet grandeur, each standing adult figure facing each other directly, under an open sky in their homeland. He depicts with care the colourful and intricately woven and printed decorative patterns ornamenting the dress of each standing figure, and of the child nestled on a cradleboard. Other sartorial details such as the moccasins worn by all three adults and the man's feather-adorned tall felt hat and arrow sash (*ceinture fléchée*) were uniquely emblematic of Indigenous Métis identity and are still proudly worn today. The artist reveals the tenderness of human commitment, not often celebrated in early Canadian painting. Though small in scale, the work is undeniably one of Rindisbacher's most magnificent achievements.

The artist also captured the unique modes of transportation of various nomadic First Nations family groups in different seasons at the Red River colony. His lively depiction of a Saulteaux family in winter dress (lot 114), progressing with dog-drawn toboggan



FIGURE 1: **PETER RINDISBACHER**
A Metis Family (A Half-caste with his Wife and Child)
watercolour and ink on paper, 1825
Collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery, G-82-215

Not for sale with this lot



FIGURE 2: **PETER RINDISBACHER**
A Souteaux Indian Travelling with his Family in Winter near Lake Winnipeg
lithograph on paper
Library & Archives Canada, 1970-188-1756
W.H. Coverdale Collection of Canadiana

Not for sale with this lot

gliding over the flat snow-swept prairie, is brought into the immediate foreground under a vast sky. In the lead, a father warmly wrapped and dressed in snowshoes, grasps bow and arrows as he confidently leads his family in their seasonal pursuit of life-sustaining buffalo, followed by his load-carrying wife and the smiling mother of their two young children. The straining, tongue-drawn dogs at centre can almost be heard panting as they pull the laden toboggan.

This watercolour was held in such high esteem that it was one of the six subjects chosen to be included in the 1826 set of lithographic views after Rindisbacher's work, mentioned above. The lithograph was entitled *A Souteaux Indian Travelling with his Family in Winter near Lake Winnipeg* (figure 2). Rindisbacher often qualified his views as "drawn after nature," a familiar artist's oath to the truthfulness of his depictions, here further qualified by identifying this scene's exact geographic location.

After five difficult years marked by hardship and natural disaster at Red River, the Rindisbacher family moved to the United States, and Peter eventually set up his studio in St. Louis, Missouri. He died prematurely in 1834, possibly of cholera.[4] He experienced a degree of success during his short life, and the inestimable and compelling truth and beauty of his work continues to captivate us. It also stimulates new scholarship, in both North America and Europe, in unraveling his style and intent, while deepening our understanding of his subjects.[5]

Two centuries on, there is growing appreciation for his unique oeuvre and its enriching contribution to our shared visual culture.

We are grateful to Gilbert L. Gignac, independent curator, previously with Library & Archives Canada, for sharing his recent unpublished research and contributing the above essay.

1. *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, online ed., vol. 6, *1821–1835*, s.v. "Rindisbacher, Peter," in collaboration with J. Russell Harper, rev. 2020, https://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/rindisbacher_peter_6E.html. Other works on Rindisbacher include Alvin M. Josephy Jr., *The Artist Was a Young Man: The Life Story of Peter Rindisbacher* (Amon Carter Museum, 1970); Émile H. Bovay, *Le Canada et les Suisses, 1604–1974* (Édition Universitaires, 1976).

2. On Swiss engravers, see Daniel Baud-Bovy, *Les maîtres de la gravure suisse* (Librairie A. Julien, 1935).

3. Edouard Pettit, *Jakob Samuel Weibel* (Stämpfli, 1996).

4. *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*.

5. See Eva Major-Marothy et al., *A Place in History: Twenty Years of Acquiring Paintings, Drawings and Prints at the National Archives of Canada* (National Archives of Canada, 1991), 17–23; Laura Peers, "'Almost True': Peter Rindisbacher's Early Images of Rupert's Land, 1821–26," *Art History* 32, no. 3 (2009): 516–44 (published by Oxford University Press).

ESTIMATE: $40,000 – 60,000



114 Peter Rindisbacher

1806 – 1834

Saulteaux Family Traveling in Winter

watercolour and ink on wove paper, circa 1824
6 ⅝ × 9 ½ in, 16.8 × 24.1 cm

PROVENANCE

By descent to the present Private Collection, Australia

ESTIMATE: $40,000 – 60,000