

# A Mesquakie Drawing

*by Gaylord Torrence*

MANY NATIVE AMERICAN works of art which have come down to us through time stimulate our curiosity, invite our study, and excite our sense of wonder, for they come from a distant past and a world very different from our own. One such object, an exceptionally rare and beautiful Mesquakie drawing (right), is preserved in the museum collection of the State Historical Society of Iowa. Its early date and relatively firm documentation establish its historic importance, while its intricate composition and complex imagery provide the viewer with a truly remarkable visual experience. But it is a drawing which was clearly intended to communicate specific information, and it is impossible to examine the work closely without also questioning its meaning.

Stylistically this drawing is extremely rare and may be unique in that no similar works by Mesquakie artists are known to exist. This fact alone makes the drawing difficult to interpret. While the Mesquakie and neighboring Great Lakes/Prairie tribes had a rich pictorial tradition in their arts which includes representational, as well as abstract, geometric imagery, figurative motifs were usually depicted in a different manner. Human, animal, and mythic images frequently appear on a variety of objects, but these representations are usually highly conventionalized and

not so complex in their organization. This specific work is unusual in the great number and diversity of animals depicted, the degree of naturalism which characterizes the drawing, and the inclusion of narrative autobiographical events. Because it does not fit within the more typical modes of expression, a comparison of this drawing with other works in which the pictorial system has been well documented is impossible, and many of the questions concerning its interpretation cannot be precisely answered. We are confronted with the realization that, as with many pictographic representations from the Great Lakes culture, the artist's verbal explanation would be needed to convey the full meaning of this drawing. At the same time, certain facts are clearly expressed and others are strongly suggested.

The drawing is attributed to Wacochachi (pronounced Wah co shah shee), a member of the Mesquakie tribe. The Mesquakie are more commonly known as the Fox, or Sac and Fox, but their name for themselves is Meskwahki haki, translated as "Red Earths" or "Red Earth People." Together with the Sauk, a separate tribe with whom they were joined in formal alliance since the early 1700s, they migrated to Iowa during the last half of the eighteenth century. Often treated as one tribe by the United States government, the Mesquakie and

The ink drawing (right) attributed to Wacochachi consists of two panels, each 9 $\frac{7}{8}$ " high by 15 $\frac{5}{8}$ " wide.







Sauk constituted the most important native American group in Iowa during the historic period.

Wacochachi was a member of the Fox clan of the Mesquakie tribe, and, as an important war chief, he was one of the principal leaders of his tribe during the first half of the nineteenth century. As a man of rank and achievement, his name, written phonetically in a variety of spellings, is recorded in at least three treaties and appears in other documents as well. He was an individual of impressive appearance, and his dramatic portrait is the only Mesquakie image to appear in the atlas produced by Karl Bodmer, the artist who accompanied Prince Maximilian on his exploration of the American West in 1833–1834.

Wacochachi must have had frequent contact with Colonel George L. Davenport, post trader for the Mesquakie and Sauk tribes at Fort Armstrong on the Mississippi River from 1816 until 1839. An abbreviation of his name appears several times in Davenport's ledgers, and a later event indicates that a special bond of friendship and respect existed between the two men: After Davenport's death in 1845, the Mesquakie tribe honored the trader with an elaborate ritual at his gravesite, at which time they erected a cedar post painted with totemic emblems and figures of slain enemies. It was Wacochachi who presided at the ceremony.

This relationship as well as the artist's materials may explain to some extent the drawing's existence. It was not uncommon for traders and military men who were closely associated with Indians to purchase or commission works of art, and often they would provide materials such as paper, ink, pencils, and watercolors. It is possible that Davenport asked his friend Wacochachi to make the drawing and gave him the materials, and then signed Wacochachi's name when it was finished. Wacochachi might also have made the drawing on his own initiative and later presented it to Davenport.

In 1973 the drawing was discovered in the State Historical Library in Des Moines during a routine inventory of books in the collection. At some time it had been folded and placed between the pages of a large volume belonging to Colonel Davenport, and this volume was

later presented to the historical department in 1924 through the bequest of Naomi Davenport, his daughter.

The drawing, sometimes referred to as a pictograph, was executed in pen and ink on two sheets of white paper joined by sealing wax. The overall compositional unity, the similarity or continuation of subject matter extending from one page to the other, as well as the identical style of drawing and scale of the figures, would suggest that the two parts were intended as a single work. At the same time, each page seems conceptually and compositionally complete in itself. It is really impossible to know if the paper was joined before the artist began his work in order to provide a larger format, or if a second sheet was added as the drawing progressed, or if the two separate drawings depicting different events were joined by Colonel Davenport after their completion.

The image is basically drawn in the archaic Great Lakes tradition, characterized by the flat, two-dimensional treatment of each figure, with no attempt to indicate background or spatial depth. Yet within the restrictions of this pictographic style, the figures are expressively drawn. While they exist only as silhouettes, and even though interior details are omitted, their sensitively rendered contours are highly descriptive, providing clear identification of each species. This is perhaps the most remarkable and unusual feature of the drawing; nearly one hundred different species are exquisitely delineated and combined with human events to form a dynamic and rhythmic composition. The artist has essentially recorded the vast array of animals, birds, and fish commonly found in the upper Mississippi Valley during the early nineteenth century, and, in doing so, has created a vivid sense of place. He has suggested a landscape, not through a naturalistic portrayal of hills, trees, rivers, and sky as in the Euro-American artistic tradition, but by depicting the creatures which fill these places with life and spirit. Within this rich environment, human events are pictured with varying effectiveness. In the lower panel the figures are especially animated, and Wacochachi has powerfully conveyed the drama and tension of the decisive moment of





JOSLYN ART MUSEUM, OMAHA, NEBRASKA

When Prince Maximilian met a delegation of Mesquakie and Sauk Indians in St. Louis at the beginning of his western exploration of 1833–1834, he described the encounter as “the first opportunity of becoming acquainted with the North American Indians in all their originality.” His companion, the artist Karl Bodmer, produced this striking portrait from that meeting. Wakusasse is depicted wearing the roach headdress and facial paint characteristic of Great Lakes warriors. Wakusasse (Wacochachi) is the artist who produced the remarkable drawing in the museum collection of the State Historical Society of Iowa.

battle. He has depicted himself leaving his beaver trap line and charging upon his well-armed enemy. He has fired an arrow, striking his victim, who has recoiled and doubled from its impact, leaving no doubt as to the outcome of the encounter.

Probably the most important question in

attempting to understand the content of the drawing is whether all the images constitute a continuous narrative — one story in which all of the elements are sequentially related. This seems impossible to determine by examining the drawing alone because no single line of thought adequately explains, without inconsistency or contradiction, the variety of figures and events and the relationships existing between them.

It does seem apparent that the drawing is primarily autobiographical, showing three events in the life of Wacochachi. Since prehistoric times, it has been the tradition of native American warriors to record their victories in a variety of pictographic forms on shell, stone, wood, hide, and antler, and they continued this practice when non-Indian materials such as paper, pen, and ink became available. On each panel, the great multitude of creatures revolves around a principal human encounter in which a warrior is slaying an enemy from another tribe. These events form the visual and conceptual center of organization for each composition, and it is very probable that both heroes, as well as one figure in a minor event, represent Wacochachi. In the upper panel, his name appears above him, in handwriting identified as Colonel Davenport's. Written below the name is the word *oquiman*, a phonetic spelling of the Mesquakie word for chief. On all three occasions, he is depicted wearing a “raven belt,” a distinctive feathered ornament worn only by warriors of great achievement, and Wacochachi may have intended this as a pictographic means of personal identification.

Wacochachi has also indicated a spiritual bond between himself and many of the surrounding animals, and it is unlikely that he would presume to portray such relationships if he were depicting a man other than himself. In the lower panel this relationship between the warrior and several of the birds and animals has been established by waved lines which flow from the various creatures and converge within the man. In Great Lakes art, waved or jagged lines universally symbolize the transmission of sacred power. All Great Lakes Indians, including the Mesquakie, perceived the natural world to be animated by a multitude of



spirits called Manitous. They believed that the earth, sky, underworld, and all other elements of nature were sacred, and that these elements were personified by numerous supernatural beings, the Manitous, who granted power and bestowed blessings. These deities manifested themselves in a variety of physical and mythical forms, and various ones revealed themselves as spirit helpers to men and women during their vision quests. These guardian spirits could be called upon in time of need, and no warrior would confront the enemy in battle without doing so. It appears that Wacochachi first filled the space surrounding the battle with all of the common life forms which shared his world, and then, by adding the waved lines, indicated those which functioned directly as his guardian spirits.

In the center of the upper panel, Wacochachi has portrayed himself in another battle, shooting an enemy from ambush behind a tree. The victim may have been one of the party of buffalo hunters drawn directly above. It was a common practice whenever possible to surprise enemy hunters while their concentration was focused on the events of the hunt. A single line connects Wacochachi with the image of a hawk clutching a smaller bird in its talons. This hawk configuration resembles a glyph, a pictographic symbol used to signify the name of the person represented, but if this were the case, the hawk would be in close proximity to the person it was intended to identify. Furthermore, the name Wacochachi is not translated as a hawk or other kind of bird but as "Brave Fox" or, more completely, "The Fox Who is Victorious in War and Will Live to Grow Old." The name in Davenport's handwriting indicates Wacochachi's identity, and we may assume that the hawk is not a name glyph but another guardian spirit. Wacochachi might also have drawn the line to emphasize a verbal narration in which he stated that he killed his enemy as surely and swiftly as the hawk grasps its prey.

The third human encounter appears along the lower left side of the top panel, but it is difficult to determine what is occurring. It would appear that one man is striking or lancing the other, but it could also be a friendly meeting or an exchange. The bison hunters

dominate much of the rest of the top panel, as do the highly descriptive images of fishes and water birds, which seem to be related to the two scenes of men fishing. It is impossible to know if the events depicted, including those in the lower panel, occurred in direct succession or were widely separated by time and place. One may only speculate what, if any, relationship exists between these diverse images.

Even though we cannot know his exact intentions or the conditions which resulted in the creation of this drawing, Wacochachi has left behind a fascinating work of art. The very factors which make it difficult to analyze also account for the richness, mystery, and expressive power it projects. Wacochachi has conveyed much more than an assembly of animals and a record of personal experience. He has evoked for us an image of Iowa as a place that we will never fully know, a dynamic world whose pale outlines are barely visible today, an open land of wild, rolling prairie, dense forest, and unrestricted rivers, all inhabited by an abundance of living creatures who shared their world with the Mesquakie. □

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

The only work devoted specifically to the Wacochachi pictograph is "Wacochachi's Talking Paper" by Jack W. Musgrove and Mary R. Musgrove, *Annals of Iowa*, 42 (Summer 1974), 325-43. The general literature on the various aspects of Mesquakie culture and history is extensive. An excellent basic source is Natalie F. Joffe, "The Fox of Iowa" in *Acculturation in Seven American Indian Tribes*, ed. Ralph Linton (New York: Appleton-Century, 1940). Other valuable references are Thomas Forsyth, "An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Sauk and Fox Nations of Indian Traditions (1827)" in *The Indian Tribes of the Upper Mississippi Valley and Region of the Great Lakes*, ed. Emma H. Blair, (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1911-1912), vol. 2, pp. 183-245; William Jones, "Ethnography of the Fox Indians" in *Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 125*, ed. Margaret W. Fisher (Washington, 1939); Allison B. Skinner, "Observations on the Ethnology of the Sauk Indians," *Bulletin of the Public Museum of the City of Milwaukee*, 5 (1-3) (Milwaukee, 1923-1925). Publications which focus on the art of the Great Lakes Indians are *Art of the Great Lakes Indians* (Flint Institute of Arts, 1973); Ruth B. Phillips, *Patterns of Power* (Kleinburg, Ontario: McMichael Canadian Collection, 1984); and Garrick Mallery, *Picture Writing of the American Indians, Tenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution (1888-89)* (reprint, New York: Dover Publication, 1972).