

The Bandera PROPHEET

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Frontier Tales

By Rebecca Huffstutler Norton
The Bandera Prophet

The Texas frontier was a place of contrast where the wild, untamed land pushed against cities that strained to be civilized. In the 19th century, European immigrants brought a cosmopolitan spirit to San Antonio, giving the city a more cultured atmosphere away from the frontier's brutal lawlessness. Artists such as Hermann Lungkwitz, Carl von Iwonski and Theodore Gentilz settled in the city and the surrounding hill country, doing what they were formally trained to do – paint the people and landscapes of Texas. Among them was a gentle lady from Germany, Louise Wueste, who is believed to be the first Euro-Anglo woman artist working in Texas.

Born in 1805, Louise was raised in a prosperous family of merchants, artists and musicians. She married a handsome doctor, Peter, and had three children. Their idyllic life was short-lived when Peter died at 37 after contracting typhoid fever from infected patients. The heartbroken widow returned to her parents with her young children. It was then she developed her raw artistic talent by studying at an art academy in Düsseldorf.

By the 1850s, Germans were immigrating to Texas to pursue better opportunities in this new land. Louise was dismayed when her daughter, Adeline, immigrated with her husband in 1852. Adeline kept a diary for her mother in which she described their journey and the adventures that ensued when they arrived in Texas. Sister Emma and brother Daniel soon made their own journey to join Adeline. In 1859, Louise herself made the voyage to join her children in San Antonio.

Adjusting to her new life was not easy. While more cultivated, San Antonio was a far cry from the enlightened ambiance in which she came from. Not wanting to be a burden on her children, Louse promoted herself to the well-to-do as a portrait artist. By 1860, she had opened a studio, advertising “the services of her art training in taking likenesses in oil or drawing, as well as to give lessons in every branch of art...”

At the onset of the Civil War, she journeyed to Piedras Negras, Mexico, to be with Daniel, who had established a business there. In 1863, she wrote to Emma, lamenting, “Painting is a queer art in America where only commerce is recognized.... we live in mud houses with dirt floors and straw roofs, even without windows.... At present there are no commissions to be had for an artist.”

She returned to San Antonio where the post war city was beginning to grow, giving her more opportunities to sustain herself as an artist with commissioned portraits and teaching art in La Villita along the river. She occasionally visited Daniel who had moved to Eagle Pass to a large house with a garden. It was on one such trip in 1874 that the harsh conditions of the frontier caught up with her. She embarked on the trip with a neglected boil on her back. The eight-day carriage ride in the heat and across the rough terrain aggravated the lesion. By the time she arrived, the boil had become infected, covering her entire back. A brutal end for this frontier lady artist.

(Quotes taken from Art for History's Sake by Cecilia Steinfeldt)