

Basic Detail Report



Title: Death of DeSoto

Date: 1873

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@3e136

Medium: Oil on canvas

Description: Culverhouse specialized in genre themes with subjects influenced by seventeenth-century Dutch painting: street markets, ice skaters, tavern interiors, and nocturnal scenes illuminated by moonlight or candlelight. Although he often painted American scenes, his work firmly adhered to the Dutch tradition and frequently included images of his native Holland. Culverhouse also painted landscapes and an occasional history painting. The discovery, exploration, and settlement of North America was a popular subject in America in the mid-nineteenth century.

Culverhouse's paintings of the famous Spanish Conquistador Hernando de Soto may have been inspired by recently published accounts of his life. (1) Widely acclaimed paintings of the explorer by Peter Rothermel (1843; Saint Bonaventure University Art Collection, Saint Bonaventure, New York), William Powell (1855; United States Capitol, Washington, D.C.), and Edwin White (whereabouts unknown) also may have provided inspiration. White's painting, described as a moonlight scene, may bear the most resemblance to Culverhouse's. (2) In search of magnificent cities and richly endowed temples, de Soto and his band of soldiers and priests disembarked at Tampa Bay, Florida, in 1539. Unlike his predecessors Hernando Cortes and Francesco Pizarro, however, de Soto found no golden cities. Instead, he is mainly remembered for his discovery of the Mississippi River (an achievement that may actually belong to an earlier explorer, Alvarez de Pineda) and the exploration of the lands of the Southeast and the lower Mississippi Valley, which

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opened that area to European colonization. (3) Culverhouse's "Death of de Soto" depicts events that were dramatically described in almost all the popular historical accounts of the explorer's travels. In the dramatic flickering torchlight, with the light of a full moon streaming through the doorway to the building, the dying de Soto lies wrapped in furs, with his soldiers, priests, and a few Indian guides solemnly gathered around him. He appoints Luis de Moscoso to succeed him as governor and captain general of the lands of Florida, handing him his sword with the blessing of the Church. The rest of the assembly raise their swords, pledging obedience to Moscoso. Like many of Culverhouse's nighttime scenes, the atmosphere of "The Death of De Soto" is bathed in a warm glow; rich reds, oranges, browns, and olive greens predominate. In the manner of accepted academic practice at the mid-nineteenth century, the painting is very detailed and its surface highly finished. Over a span of twenty-one years, Culverhouse painted at least seven similar, though not identical, versions of de Soto's death and burial. (4) The seven known canvases vary greatly in size and were probably not intended as a series. While each depicts a different moment, the order in which they were executed does not correspond to the order of the events depicted. The New Britain painting is the only one that depicts the Spaniard's death (the others illustrate various moments of his burial.) In all of these works Culverhouse used his characteristic moonlight and torchlight illumination to heighten the drama. Most if not all of these canvases may have been commissioned; none of them appear to have been shown at any of the major venues where Culverhouse exhibited.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Nancy Wall Moure and Donelson F. Hoopes, "American Narrative Painting", exhib. cat. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1974), p. 107; Natalie Spassky, "American Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art", 3 vols. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1980), vol. 2, pp. 132-34. MAS NOTES: 1. See, for example, Theodore Irving, "The Conquest of Florida" (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1851); Lambert A. Wilmer, "The Life, Travels and Adventures of Ferdinand de Soto" (Philadelphia: J. T. Lloyd, 1859); and "Death and Burial of De Soto," "Southern Literary Messenger" 31 (December 1860): 438-41. 2. White's painting was described in a review of the National Academy show: "Stretched upon a bier on the shore of the Mississippi lies the body of the first European discoverer of its waters. A group of monks and warriors is paying the last offices to their dead leader. A torch produces strong effects of light and shade. The moon partially hidden gives further solemnity to the scene"; "At the National Academy of Design," "Albion" 11 (April 24, 1852): 202. 3. David J. Weber, "The Spanish Frontier in America" (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 34. 4. Besides the New Britain canvas, the known paintings are: "Burial of de Soto", 1854, oil on canvas, 23 x 29 in. (58.4 x 73.7 cm), John H. Garzoli, San Rafael, Calif.; "The Burial of De Soto" ("The Discoverer of the Mississippi River"), 1866, oil on canvas, 30 x 50 in. (76.2 x 127 cm), Herbert Roman, New York; "Burial of de Soto", ca. 1860-70, oil on canvas, 26 x 36 in. (66 x 91.4 cm), R. W. Norton Art Gallery, Shreveport, La.; "Burial of de Soto", 1875, oil on canvas,

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26 1/2 x 44 1/4 in. (67.3 x 112.4 cm), Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven; "Death of De Soto", n.d., oil on canvas, 28 x 44 in. (71.1 x 111.8 cm), William Doyle Galleries, New York, October 5, 1988, lot 33; and "Burial of De Soto", n.d., oil on canvas, 28 x 44 in. (71.1 x 111.8 cm), Vose Galleries, Boston.

Dimensions: Frame: 54 x 93 1/2 in. (137.2 x 237.5 cm) Image: 46 3/4 x 84 1/4 in. (118.7 x 214 cm)