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Portrait of Pecanne

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Harvard University, Houghton Library, hyde_ms_eng_509_2_4

"Pecane Miami Chief" (ca. 1776–78), from Henry Hamilton, "Drawings of North American Scenes and Native Americans," MS Eng. 509.2, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Pecanne is arrayed in silver. His only known portrait renders the prominent Miami headman with silver brooches on his scalp lock, four bright silver wheels dangling below his slashed and elongated earlobe, silver armbands clasped tight above each elbow, dozens of shining silver brooches sewed onto the shoulders of his linen trade shirt, and a small ceremonial hatchet in hand, silver gilded. Pacanne's serene profile portrait has something to tell us about the importance, the cost, and the fragility of Indigenous

alliances during Britain's American Revolution.

Henry Hamilton, lieutenant governor and superintendent of Indian Affairs at Detroit, made the sketch sometime between fall 1775 and late summer 1778. A highborn, well-read, carousing, multilingual Irishman, Hamilton served under the great James Wolfe in the Seven Years' War. He was there to witness the general's fatal, world-altering triumph over France on the Plains of Abraham outside Quebec in September 1759. A reputation for competence, interest in Native people, and the right connections secured Hamilton his post at Detroit in 1775, just as the American Revolution began. Two years later, he received orders he'd long waited for: to employ the Indians in his district "in making a diversion and exciting an alarm upon the frontiers." Complying with those orders—arming and organizing raiding parties and keeping account of captives and scalps brought into Detroit as proof of success—earned him the loathing of settlers throughout the West. It's doubtful that any of the many people who feared and hated him knew that the "hair buyer general," as they came to call him, was also a sensitive artist.¹

He was no Benjamin West. Indians also preoccupied some of that celebrated artist's defining works, most importantly his 1770 masterpiece *The Death of General Wolfe*, with its unforgettable image of a crouching warrior gazing raptly at the expiring general. West leaned on his Pennsylvania upbringing to buttress his claims to authority. He assured admiring European contemporaries and patrons that the details in these artworks—fine-lined tattoos, decorated gunstocks, feathered scalp locks—came from firsthand knowledge. But for all the delicacy, grandeur, and verisimilitude of his paintings, West almost always rendered Indigenous people as

¹ For orders, see George Germain to Guy Carleton, Whitehall, March 26, 1777, in *Documents of the American Revolution, 1770–1783*, ed. Kenneth Gordon Davies, vol. 14 (Irish University Press, 1976), 51–53. For the raids, see Bernard W. Sheehan, "'The Famous Hair Buyer General': Henry Hamilton, George Rogers Clark, and the American Indian," *Indiana Magazine of History* 79, no. 1 (1983): 1–28.

generic types. Hamilton's cruder and comparatively unknown portraits do something more interesting. They represent individuals.²

Eight of Hamilton's portraits survive in Harvard's Houghton Library, each executed in sharpened pencil on little 3½" × 5" paper cards edged in gilt. Character observations on the versos offer context. "This was a very wise and moderate Sachem of the Wyandot nation," he wrote on the back of Quosquiandorong's portrait. "This man was a very respected warrior of the Mohawk nation," reads another, about a figure with an international reputation: "His name in the Huron or Wyandot language is Skangress—in the Iroquois Otcheek." An unnamed portrait captures a more modest figure, "one of those characters, always to be found among the Indians," who travels from town to town bearing self-interested news. "They are termed bad birds, or birds of ill omen, as their reports generally tend to intimate which they presume to be the best road to accomplish their views." Tzenoritzzi, a thirty-eight-year-old "nominal prince" of the Wyandot, was "a well-disposed man who was easily led, given to Liquor, and not attended to by his Nation other than as hereditary chief."³

Pacanne was the most distinguished of Hamilton's subjects, and one of his nation's leading figures. From their base at the bustling trading hub of Miamitown, he and his family controlled the portage between the Maumee and the Wabash River systems—a strategic choke point on the main water route linking Canada and Louisiana. Pacanne enjoyed special renown in Detroit for a

² For West and types, see Stephanie Pratt, *American Indians in British Art, 1700–1840* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), 20–40.

³ The portraits are online at https://hollisarchives.lib.harvard.edu/repositories/24/archival_objects/340837. For context, see Martin W. Walsh, "The Native American Sketches of Henry Hamilton," *Michigan History Magazine*, May/June 1997, and J. Martin West, "The Henry Hamilton Sketches: Visual Images of Woodland Indians," in *Selected Papers from the 1987 and 1988 George Rogers Clark Trans-Appalachian Frontier History Conferences*, ed. Robert J. Holden (Eastern National Park and Monument Association, 1988).

feat he'd performed as a young man. In 1764, in the midst of Pontiac's War, a British officer of Hamilton's acquaintance had been captured at Miamitown, tied by the neck to a stake, and readied for torture. At the last possible moment, Pacanne rode into town shouting, "I give that man his life!" Though probably a staged political performance, the rescue established the headman's enduring reputation as a savvy leader equipped to manage his people's relationship with Great Britain.⁴

Hamilton's artistic inclinations harmonized with his duty. As superintendent at Detroit, he was responsible for maintaining British influence across much of eastern North America's complex international system and recruiting Indigenous support for suppressing the American Revolution. Success depended on personal relationships, skillful diplomacy, and the capacity to exert military force. Above all, it depended on Britain's ability to provision imported consumer goods for Indigenous economies, through distribution hubs like Detroit. In peacetime, British firms sent around £135,000 in goods annually for Indigenous producers/consumers in the fur and hide trades. But the American Revolution forced the Crown to buy and distribute most of these goods as gifts, for three reasons. The conflict deranged transatlantic commerce, disrupted regular hunting and trapping, and gave Native people leverage to be more demanding of anyone courting their favor.⁵

All that silver in Pacanne's portrait gestures at the courtship's costs. Textiles accounted for more of the volume and value of British trade and presents to Native allies, and nothing matched the strategic significance of imported guns and ammunition. But as Susan Sleeper-Smith has

⁴ For the intervention, see "Journal of Captain Thomas Morris," in *Early Western Travels*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites, vol. 1 (Arthur H. Clark, 1904), 316.

⁵ For the trade and £135,000, see Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indigenous Prosperity and American Conquest: Indian Women of the Ohio River Valley, 1690–1792* (University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 166–71.

brilliantly shown, silver held special allure. Native women likely consumed most of what was imported into the Ohio Country and Great Lakes region, adorning their clothing with glistening silver brooches. Demand for the precious metal kept several silversmiths busy at Detroit, where at one point during the Revolution Indian Department storehouses contained nearly twenty thousand silver ornaments like the ones featured in Pacanne's portrait.⁶

The metal itself had been hauled out of mines in Mexico and Peru by Indigenous laborers. By the mid-eighteenth century, Spain relied on Britain to feed a significant proportion of its subjects. This vulnerability created a negative trade balance, one that Madrid reluctantly addressed by exporting precious metals from the Americas—hence the British saying, unkind but accurate, that Spain was “the Darling and the Silver Mine of England.” Pacanne's people seemed particularly adept at wresting from Britain some of the treasure Britain had wrested from Spain after Spain had wrested it from Zacatecas and Potosí. A colleague of Hamilton's placated visitors from other nations by assuring them they'd be decorated in silver “as fine as a Miamis.”⁷

A testament to the importance and expense of Indigenous alliances, Pacanne's portrait also gestures at *why* Britain found those alliances so costly during the American Revolution. That's because they were as fragile as they were indispensable. In mid-1778, Pacanne was one of hundreds of Native men who accompanied Hamilton to the small fort and settlement of Vincennes, to retake the Illinois Country from Virginian insurgents led by George Rogers Clark. Hamilton's multinational force easily retook Vincennes. Conferring with emissaries from a

⁶ Sleeper-Smith, *Indigenous Prosperity and American Conquest*, esp. 160–76, 193–202.

⁷ For the Iberia trade and silver, see James G. Lydon, *Fish and Flour for Gold, 1680–1800: Southern Europe in the Colonial Balance of Payments*, e-publication (Library Company of Philadelphia, 2008), quote on p. 2. For “as fine,” see de Peyster to Frederick Haldimand, Detroit, November 3, 1781, in *Collections and Researches Made by the Pioneer Society of the State of Michigan*, ed. Henry S. Bartholomew, 2nd ed., vol. 10 (Wynkoop Hallenbeck Crawford, State Printers, 1908), 536–37.

dozen Indigenous nations, the superintendent turned his attention to planning a hugely ambitious spring campaign to roll back the settler frontier across eastern North America. The year 1779, he confidently predicted, would see “the greatest number of Savages on the Frontiers that has ever been known.”⁸

But like most other Native allies, Pacanne and his Miami warriors abandoned the superintendent to Clark’s reconquest in early 1779, once news reached the region that their former patrons the French had allied themselves with the United States and declared war on Britain. Hamilton’s hoped-for campaign collapsed along with British influence, and Clark sent the superintendent and his men to Virginia in irons. He had them marched through the same seething Kentucky settlements that his war parties had terrorized over the previous two years. By the time the miserable prisoners arrived at Williamsburg in summer 1779, Spain had declared war on Britain, too, and the Spanish governor of Louisiana was distributing presents to potential allies throughout the eastern Mississippi Valley.⁹

As General Thomas Gage, Britain’s commander in chief at the start of the war, once observed: “Our Quarrells are generally the Indian Harvests.” Hamilton’s despairing replacement at Detroit, Arendt de Peyster, felt that unlike the Haudenosaunee, Cherokee, Shawnee, and others nearer the settler frontier, the mighty nations of the Great Lakes and Illinois Country failed to

⁸ For Hamilton’s account, see John D. Barnhart, ed., *Henry Hamilton and George Rogers Clark in the American Revolution, with the Unpublished Journal of Henry Hamilton* (R. E. Banta, 1951), 102–205. For “the greatest,” see Hamilton to the commander at Natchez, Vincennes, January 13, 1779, copy enclosed in Clinton to Germain (no. 50), New York, May 3, 1779, British National Archives/Colonial Office/5/97.2/233.

⁹ Hamilton journal in Barnhart, *Henry Hamilton and George Rogers Clark in the American Revolution*, 159–70, 177. See also Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 371–76. Hamilton’s capture and news of the French alliance proved particularly corrosive to British relations with the Anishinaabeg. See Michael McDonnell, *Masters of Empire: Great Lakes Indians and the Making of America* (Hill and Wang, 2015), 177–223.

grasp the existential stakes of the American Revolution. Addressing a Potawatomi delegation in 1781, he tried to make the case in a talk that was at once manipulative, self-serving, and true. In the time of their ancestors, he lectured them, Spaniards “got possession of an Indian Country the other side of the Mississippi, where they Killed Thousands of the Inhabitants to get the stuff that those Bracelets and Gorgets you are now wearing were made of.” Though Potawatomis had no silver to mine, he continued, they possessed expansive, fertile lands. “If therefore you listen to those sugar-mouthed Spaniards,” de Peyster warned them, what would the “Spirits of your ancestors say if they knew that their Burrying Grounds were to be levelled by Ploughs, and their Bones disturbed for the Spaniards and Virginians to sow Corn, &c.” While de Peyster didn’t report the Potawatomis’ reactions, we do know they left Detroit arrayed in silver.¹⁰

¹⁰ For Gage, see McDonnell, *Masters of Empire*, 110. For de Peyster, see “Council at Detroit with the Pottawatamies from St. Joseph, Terre Couple and Coeur de Cerf, March 11, 1781,” in Bartholomew, *Collections and Researches Made by the Pioneer Society of the State of Michigan*, 10:435–55.