A Brief Introduction to the Artistic Thought and Work of John Philip Koehler

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The story is told of a young Seminary student who journeyed to Neillsville, WI during his junior year (c. 1946) in order to visit with the aged John Philip Koehler. When the youth entered and saw the walls filled with Koehler's original artwork (painting was one of Koehler's major activities during those Neillsville years) he ventured a comment to break the ice: "Herr Professor, pinseln sie noch?" It was a well-intentioned question spoken with sincere motives, but with bad grammar (German was NOT the student's mother-tongue) and the quick-witted Koehler played off the *faux pas* and uttered a truth that history certainly attests to: "Ich habe nie im Leben gepinselt." [1]

What Koehler claimed, history supports. John Philip Koehler (1859-1951) was a man of remarkable talents. We would agree with the assessment the *Lutheran Cyclopedia* makes of his character:

> His scholarship was a comprehensive and comprehending survey of life, thought and emotion. Pre-eminently, however, he was a historian, who read the record of the Gospel in history in its widest sense, including the wide field of art, on which his views are illuminating. [2]

While there certainly are a number of topics intertwined with the life of Koehler into which our discussion could branch out, we have decided to focus our attention on one often-overlooked area of Koehler's life: his art—both his thoughts on art and his artwork itself. Both were notable and influential, as the last phrase of the above biography hints at. Both, especially his thoughts concerning art, deserved to be discussed, for they provide pertinent information concerning the man Koehler. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to analyze in any way the tumultuous years between 1920-1933, the author hopes that this paper will help provide some additional information necessary for understanding the man around whom much controversy even now continues to swirl.

In order to achieve our end, we would propose to look at Koehler's artistic views and work in the following manner:

I. Koehler's Artistic Heritage and Legacy
II. Koehler's Views on Art
III. The Place of Art in the Seminary's Curriculum During the Koehler Years
IV. A Walk Through Koehler's Art Gallery

[1] The pun, as is obvious, centers on the German word *Pinsel*. *Pinsel is* the noun "paintbrush", so according to logical German grammar rules of verb formation the verb *pinseln* ought to mean, "to use a paintbrush." While *pinseln* certainly can mean that, Koehler employed a secondary meaning, "to be an amateur." Hence Koehler's reply: "I have never been an amateur at anything in this life." The youth was Philemon Hensel, graduate of Northwestern College class of 1944, and now Assistant Editor of *Faith-Life*, the official periodical of the Protestant Conference. This account, as well as others in this paper, were recorded by the author during an interview conducted at Mr. Hensel's home in Manitowoc, WI in spring of 1991.

[2] The Lutheran Cyclopedia, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954 (Erwin Leuker, Ed.) p. 556

I. Koehler's Artistic Heritage and Legacy

John Philip Koehler both inherited his love for art and passed it on. For at least four generations the Koehler family was involved with artistic ventures of one sort or another, but it was John Philip who developed the artistic talents of the Koehler's to their fullest, both in thought and practice.

In order to understand how J. P. Koehler came into his artistic sense and ability, we really must begin our story with his grandfather. Koehler's grandfather lived at Neuwied on the Rhine, in the northern part of Germany. There, in a single room house, the man (whose name is unknown) eked out a meager existence by weaving ornamental linen brocade, a commodity much in demand at the close of the eighteenth century. But by the time of the birth of Christian Philip Koehler (J. P. Koehler's father) in 1828 the Age of Romanticism was on its way out, soon to be replaced by Impressionism in the art and fashion world. Consequently, as the market declined for damask, Koehler's grandfather was forced to weave almost incessantly to make a living, while employing the talents of his children as well in his livelihood.[3]

There is something to be said for family unity and co-operation, but as C. Philip Koehler grew up in the Neuwied home, he also grew up to detest weaving, and had absolutely no desire to take over the family business. Philip wanted to be a pastor. While Koehler's mother rejoiced in this, the elder Koehler , the next best thing to being unchurched, would hear nothing of it. Now this is not the story of how Philip Koehler became a pastor. But what we are interested in is the fact that instead of taking the impressionable youth to church on Sunday, the elder Koehler would take him and the other members of the family for long walks out in the Rhineland countryside. It was on these long Sunday morning walks that Philip undoubtedly developed his deep appreciation for the beauty of nature, an appreciation which he, in turn, would pass on to his son John. This is evidenced by the fact that the majority of J. P. Koehler's paintings were of scenes from nature.[4]

As we know, in the end Christian Philip Koehler eventually was led into the Lutheran ministerium, serving as pastor of First German Luth. Church. A mere four months after his arrival at Manitowoc in September of 1858, John Philip Koehler was born on January 27, 1859.

From early childhood, John Philip Koehler was interested in art. He drew constantly, and undoubtedly such artistic developments were encouraged by his father.[5] Years later Koehler, the first editor of the *Black and Red* (Northwestern College's school paper), adorned the front cover of the premier issue with original art work. One can also see a number of his pencil sketches on the front covers of Faith-Life.[6] His Seminary journal, which he kept faithfully from the age of nineteen on, is illustrated with many a pencil sketch.[7] While on the subject of using a pencil, we could also note that Koehler even had an artistic flair to his penmanship. In fact, Koehler taught the penmanship course during his professorship at Northwestern (1888-1900). With this background we can understand his comment in his *History of the Wisconsin Synod* concerning Adolf Hoenecke's penmanship, that "Hoenecke's handwriting, too, was one of the most beautiful the writer [Koehler] has come across."[8]

[3] Christian Philip's home life is described in J. P. Koehler's History, p. 48

[4] The exact number of paintings from the hand of Koehler is unknown. Rev. Hensel recalls, though, that the walls of the Neillsville house were covered with his works, largely on themes from nature, among which was a rather large picture of the ocean, hung on the living room wall. Koehler also painted many portraits, and in his study hung three dashing paintings of Germany's generals: Von Bismark, Scharnhorst and Von Mackensen. Koehler's third favorite topic was, naturally, religious themes. See Appendix A for a listing of other known extant works of Koehler.

[5] Koehler, in addition to a love of nature, also got some ability from his father. It was Christian Philip who designed the present First German building still being used in Manitowoc.

[6] cf. Vols: XLII No.1; LXII, No.5 and 6. On the front page of Vol. XLI, No. 2 there is an excellent pencil drawing of Christ praying in Gethsemane. Two of these are included in Pt. IV and a third is on the cover of this paper.

The Koehler family also seems to have had a knack for architecture. As mentioned earlier, Christian Philip designed the present First German Luth. of Manitowoc. During his pastorate in Two Rivers (1882-1888) John Philip designed the building for that congregation which is still standing today. In addition to this, Koehler spent long hours designing the present Seminary facilities, being even too busy with them to properly address the circumstances surrounding the Beitz paper.[9] Recently, early drafts by Koehler of the "new" Seminary have been found and published in *Faith-Life* (cf. Vol. LXII, Nos. 2-3). These drawings indicate that Koehler envisioned the Seminary to be much more elaborate than the final product turned out to be.[10]

Koehler's son, Karl, likewise had a certain aptitude for designing buildings. At certain stages Karl was also involved in drafting plans for the Mequon Seminary. Also, keeping pace with his father and grandfather, Karl designed churches—even bettering the former two by two. Karl designed and supervised the building of WELS churches in Minocqua, WI (now an Episcopalian church) Mischicot, WI., and Glendale, AZ. Trinity, Minocqua has since left Koehler's building (dedicated Oct.11, 1925), while St. Peter's of Mischicot still gathers under his roof. Both buildings are built out of red granite and are designed as Karl wanted them to be—after the grand cathedrals of Europe. Hence one finds upon a visit to Mischicot that the altar area of the church is actually beneath the bell tower/steeple. Another unique feature is the ambulatory around the back of the altar. The most striking feature, however, is the two-tiered nave, with the lower seating level resting upon *terra firma*.[11] Karl also designed and built the Koehler house in Neillsville.

[7] This journal is currently in the possession of Karl Springer, a member of the Protes'tant Conf.

[8] John Philip Koehler, History of the Wisconsin Synod (St. Cloud, Minnesota: Sentinel Publishing Company for the Protes'tant Conference, 1970) p.215. Koehler also talks very enthusiastically about Hoenecke's artwork done in pencil.

[9] In an article that appeared in the WELS Historical Institute Journal in the fall of 1983, Prof. E.C. Fredrich writes: "When the time came to compare the four individual appraisals [of the Beitz paper, each member of the faculty was to write one] only three were at hand. Koehler had not written his, choosing to devote the time to drafting blueprints for the proposed Mequon Seminary plant. One who lives on this hill and works in this building cannot but be grateful for any thought and effort that went into the planning of these beautiful buildings and grounds. One could at the same time wish that back in May 1927 a little less thought and effort had been devoted to preliminary blueprints by Prof. Koehler and more to a first draft of a Gutachten." (p.40)

[10] Apparently what happened was that the final architect/contractor was unable to realize Koehler's vision. *Faith-Life* (May/June, 1989) reports: "The architect, to be sure, did not prove quite up to the task. He had absolutely no general background, which would have been necessary if he had wanted to appreciate—even from afar—the ideal principles of architecture. He also had no artistic training so that he did not understand Koehler's stylistic aims. The latter often had to take the pencil out of his hand while he was drawing." (p.4) As an example, Koehler originally intended the Seminary to be build with undressed stone. Rev. Hensel relates that the architect, a certain Mr. Clas, had only designed dairy farm buildings prior to his involvement with the Seminary building project. Even in its truncated state, however, the present Seminary facilities are most impressive.

[11] cf. Appendix B. Karl and his good friend, Ed. Zell, Sr., who was serving as pastor in Mischicot, were extremely insistent that there be no basement in the church, but for differing reasons. Koehler wanted the design to be as European as possible, whereas Zell wanted to squelch any thoughts the members might entertain of throwing fund-raising chicken dinners. So by forbidding a basement he was thereby forbidding fund-raising. Such a show of force didn't exactly sit well with the members. During the building of the church, while both Zell and Koehler were absent (having gone to the Synod convention) the members decided to start digging out a regular, full-sized basement under the nave floor. When Zell returned, however, he was furious at this development and ordered the members to refill the basement at once. The members grudgingly complied.

The uniqueness of design has caused other problems as well. Former pastor of St. Peter's, Herbert H. Kesting, relates that last year (1990) one young lady quit the congregation because she had purchased a $1600 wedding dress and wanted to walk down the center aisle on her wedding day. Koehler designed the church with two side aisles, but no center aisle.

II. Koehler's Views on Art

Koehler wrote much on the subject of art, especially during the Neillsville years when he had time to ponder

and crystallize his philosophy of art, and in Faith-Life had a open column. His views are both deep and thought-provoking. But let us attempt to express them in less vaulted language. I do not mean to imply that vaulted language is an undesirable thing; it is not, especially when speaking of art. We merely hope that we can break Koehler's lofty dialogues down into terms the common man, such as myself, can understand and, consequently, appreciate.

If you were to happen upon the Neillsville home on a lazy summer afternoon in the summer of 1931, and were to take a porch seat with Prof. Koehler with the intention of discussing art, without thinking too much about it the first question you would put to him is, "Herr Koehler, what is art?" The answer you would have received is this:

> Art, in its wider and narrower sense, is of the natural spiritual gifts of God to man the greatest; of all the processes of the human mind and heart that which is at work in giving birth to art, and its relation to knowledge and understanding, comes closest to what Paul says in I Corinthians 8 and 13 about the relation between knowledge, love and faith.
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> When a great thought, or truth, lays a compelling hand on the mind of man and makes his heart to burst with fullness and his soul to seek and it then goes forth fair and free, honest and sincere, and great and true, to the honor of God and the edification of himself and his followers: then you have art. And that is art, no matter by and in what occupation it be practised, whether you rule men or serve in a menial position; whether you teach or learn; whether you deal with spiritual or mental or inanimate things; that is art, with whatever means, great and rich, or simple and lowly, it be uttered or acted.[12]

That is Koehler's definition of art: anything that properly serves to glorify God and enlighten/better one's fellowman. Now it must be understood that here Koehler isn't limiting himself to painting, drawing—even singing or poetry; what we have here is Koehler proclaiming, "The entire life of a Christian is a work of art!" This is the broad manner in which he answers the question, "What is art?"

In his answer to you, as you sit with him there on the porch, Koehler also anticipated a second question arising in your mind, the question concerning the source of truly great art. In the above passage Koehler indicates that the source of art is the interaction of a "great thought or truth" with the human mind. In another article, entitled, "As To Appreciation of Art," Koehler says:

> With the Christian his whole life is centered in the great fact of salvation, and with that our reason, or intellect, alone does not get us anywhere. You cannot view this subject without hope, faith and love. This triad of St. Paul's is what inspires people to pray, and to gather for worship. And whatever means of expression the individual and the group are gifted with, will then be filled with the highest emotion. That is the source of real art, and this consecration of the functioning of the mind gives it a hold on the exalted ideas inherent in the message of the Gospel, an inspired grasp that is not a part of the intellect's ordinary functioning.[13]

[12] "The Art of Making Books," by J. P. Koehler in *Faith-Life*, Vol. IV, No. 4 p.15

Ultimately, then, according to Koehler the source of all real truth is the Gospel—the real truth that encounters the mind of man and motivates him to express himself in artistic form, whatever that form may be. On the side we could also note that since Koehler laid such heavy emphasis on the fact that the Gospel is history, it is small wonder that art history (that is, man's encounter with the ultimate truth of the Gospel through the ages) played such a prominent role in his history course.

What we are speaking of here is not Platonic idealism, pantheism or neo-Gnosticism. Koehler merely asserts the principle that God is the source of all truth, and, consequently, art in its various forms somehow relates to and expresses that truth. Would such a definition of art leave room for Koehler to embrace current artistic trends such as Expressionism and Modernism? In our opinion we think not. Koehler would most likely dismiss

such things as non-art, seeing that the truth of God, radiating out into the world from the very essence of God, is ordered, not random. He writes:

> Art is always true; it is never studied, but always a natural gift and thereof free in its unstudied movements. It loves order as a part of beauty and omits all pretenses and showy appearances.[14]

And yet for Koehler emotional expression (not expressionism) is the core of any artistic endeavor. He detested following "art rules" merely for the sake of following them. Such enslavement cannot produce free expression. In an article entitled, "The Wonderful in Luther's Poetry," which appeared first in the Jan. 1924 issue of the Quartalschrift, later republished (in translation) in *Faith-Life*, Koehler draws out an extended comparison between the rules of art and the decalog. In brief, it says that those unenlightened by the truth of the Gospel follow both the law of God and the rules of art slavishly, while those who bask in the freedom of the Gospel properly understand the worth of rules without necessarily being bound to observe them. He writes:

> Now then, what is the Wonderful in art? Not the rules of art! nor a conscious adherence to them. There are rules in art, all right, but not for the artist, nor for the people who view the works of art and are to be edified by them. The rules are for the visionless generations that always and again shoulder their way to the top. For, with all their intelligence, with which they corrupt the world, they would draw a blank as to the essence of the arts and poetry which they profess to teach if one did not hitch up their spirit into the complicated harness of art and then keep after them with the whip.[15]

What Koehler was striving to combat was ideas of a certain Joh. Gottsched, who in the first half of the 18th century was promoting this notion, namely, that anyone equipped with average intellect could produce art merely by following the rules of art. To this Koehler says, "Bosh!" Art needs to be produced from a contact with truth, not rules.

Now as you have been patiently absorbing this reply as you sit on the porch of Koehler's house, you somewhat presumptuously conclude that this man has painted himself into a corner, and so you spring your trap by asking him, "But Herr Professor, how do you account for the fact that many heathen people have produced famous—yes, even ideal—works of art? What of the Egyptians, the Greeks and others?" A good question, and there is silence as you wait for a reply.

[13] *Faith-Life*, Vol. IV, No. 5. p.4

[14] *Faith-Life*, Vol. IV, No. 4, p. 14

[15] *Faith-Life*, Vol. XLII, No. 6. p.15

But a reply does come. And when it does come it comes both logically and scripturally oriented:

> Nevertheless, it is also a fact that there is real art to be found among the heathen and in the modern world. There are artists of the world which have the gift to grasp certain morality, dependent on the law of God, which is inscribed in men's hearts, and that makes them conscious of the great truths which are proclaimed by the things that are made (Ro.1:20). And, in a measure, their hearts are moved to express these truths in a truly great form. From a purely human point of view, they are real artists, and we may learn from them in many ways. They have always taken their work seriously, in and ideal sense, even the humorists among them, and they have a higher aim than merely to entertain superficial minds.
>
> But their ideas and ideals remain stunted, as do the elevating influence of their message. The can and do, in their greatest works, only arouse questions concerning the fundamental things of life and eternity; they do not, and can not, give any satisfactory answer ....The sum and substance of their poetry is: life is damned. It turns about sex, and this is the cause of trouble and of grief. The so-called elevation of the soul that must and does result from such contemplation of life is, consists in, sorrow and woe.[16]

In other words, what Koehler here states is that even the heathen are capable of producing great art, due to the fact that their intellect comes in contact with the eternal truths of God through the natural law inscribed in their hearts and as it is manifested in nature (Ps. 8).

It was apparently on this very point that Koehler and August Pieper did not share viewpoints. According to Koehler, Pieper stubbornly held fast to the tenet that truth can only come from a study of dogmatics. Thus he writes in an article entitled "Art and Dogmatics":

> Our aim has been to establish the right conception of art and, in our previous issue, to correct the misleading criticisms of art offered by dogmaticians who seem to have the idea that theirs is the only safe and sure method of arriving at and of stating truth.[17]

Now it ought to be clearly understood that Koehler was in no way opposed to the study of dogmatics. What Koehler found frustrating what not dogmatics but dogmatism, that is, adherence to form and the imposition of the dogmatic form upon other disciplines. Koehler, in contrast to this, held that eternal truths of God could very well be expressed by a heathen artist, unbeknownst to him. For example, any given artist may be stirred by the beauty of the autumn colors, and be moved to capture the moment on canvas. Although that artist passes his work off as his own great achievement, he has silently bore witness to the fact—and maybe even realized it himself—that their is a higher power at work in the universe responsible for such magnificence. As it stands, there is nothing wrong with such theology; Koehler is merely testifying to the fact that the natural knowledge of God is alive and well in mankind.

What bothered Pieper, then, about such a viewpoint? In all likelihood it was the ambiguous nature of such statements. Already we have seen that Koehler felt that art was the greatest gift of God to man, and that art also serves to testify and arrive at the truth. Pieper would like to know (as I would like to know) what Koehler meant by the word "truth." Did he mean the truth of the natural knowledge of God? That we would agree art leads a person to understand. Or does he mean the message of salvation through Christ? That we would disagree with—that a painting can convert a heathen. But at the same time we must qualify our judgment because the Holy Spirit certainly can work in a heathen heart through a message structured in artistic form, such a poetry, hymnody and sermonizing. Perhaps this is part of what Koehler had in mind.

[16] From "The Art of Making Books, in *Faith-Life*, Vol. IV, No.4 p. 14

[17] *Faith-Life*, Vol. IV. No. 6, p. 9

A disagreement in philosophies of dogmatics and art, on the other hand, could easily come about through misunderstanding. We are speculating that Pieper may have understood Koehler to be using the term "art" in the narrow sense of the word, while in his writings it is clear that Koehler employs the broad sense. For Koehler, every expression motivated by a contact with the eternal truth of God is art. Hence, Koehler viewed the entire sanctified life of a Christian as a work of art. Moreover, as we have said, he accounts for the fact that unconverted man can produce true art by asserting that it is their contact with the eternal truth (not the Gospel) of God as seen operating in this world. Ultimately, Koehler also saw God's work of redemption—yes, all theology—as art. Thus, in Koehler's mind, there should be absolutely no conflict between other disciplines studied in the light of the Gospel and the chief discipline that studies the gospel, namely, exegetical dogmatics. Koehler writes:

> And the Christian who has understood what art is, in this its true sense, will harbor no fear that it is going to be harmful to theology. On the contrary, he will see that it leads to a deeper insight into the Gospel and that true theology must be art.[18]

What shall we conclude from all this? We shall conclude that Koehler was a deep thinker, and remark that it is the task of the gifted deep thinker to—in Christian love—clarify what he means. God also is deep thinker, and yet when he revealed his Truth to human beings on the pages of Scripture, he did so in a simple, understandable

way. A great deal of the beauty of the Scriptures lies in its simplicity. This is not to say that we understand the Scriptures fully. It is to say that God made the effort to make sure we understood it. And for this writer, that is what makes great art—taking difficult concepts and truths and molding them into digestible form, so that one's fellowman can share the artist's insights, appreciate them and join with the artist in his glorifying God. THAT is beneficial, and in the process God is praised and the fellowman is helped. To be sure, the tongues which the Corinthians spoke in were elevated languages professing deep thoughts in the phonics of heaven itself. But Paul preferred love to these, for it affected in a positive ways the relationships with God of many more people than himself. Even articles written in a magazine are, according to Koehler, works of art, and as such they should (to use his own words) "omit all pretenses and showy appearance."

In saying this it is not our intent to bash Koehler or dismiss him as a man full of prattle. On the contrary, Koehler's concept of every phase of a Christian's life, of God's work of redemption as being great works of art deserves much more than a passing thought. There is a great deal of truth in that, and it stirs the Christian to view his life and sanctification in a much more positive light than that of being a "blue collar believer" whose sole task is to "gut it out," until we reach eternal glory.

There is one thing, however, we should like to make clear. All things both of God and of me may well be art, but of all works, God's Word is the greatest. Thus while other disciplines do indeed, for the Christian, highlight and clarify other aspects of God's work, it is the Word that most clearly does so. History, music, drawing, science—whatever—must take a back seat to the study of His Word. That is the source of all truth, not merely another manifestation of it that is on par with others in the pastoral academic world. It is *primus inter pares*. Christ said, "If you continue in my word, then you are my disciples indeed (Jn. 8:31)."

[18] *Faith-Life*, Vol. IV, No. 5, p. 5

But Koehler certainly is right in asserting that it is the Christian who alone can gain a proper understanding of all artistic endeavors, and it is the Christian alone who, upon studying all matters, can properly assess their worth and formulate a valid *Weltanschauung*. This undoubtedly is what pushed Koehler to incorporate studies of the arts (music, painting, architecture) into the Seminary's curriculum, as we shall now see.

III. The Place of Art in the Seminary's Curriculum During the Koehler Years

As Koehler's views on art were emerging and maturing, he was anxious to divulge his insights. But in order to effectively communicate the information, Koehler needed a forum. He found one. In this section we will see that Koehler made a study of the arts part of every pastor's training during his years at the Seminary. This undoubtedly was motivated, in part, by the attitudes just discussed, foremost of which is that it is the Christian who is most capable of all people in the world for embracing a proper understanding and appreciation of art. Alongside a discussion of the art history course per se we will also consider the value of such instruction.

The ideal place, one would suppose, for exposure to the world of art would be a liberal arts college, such as Northwestern University of the late 1800's. One should not conclude, however, that the lack of a formal art history course at Northwestern in those days indicates apathy toward the subject in general. This is far from the case. Back at the time when Koehler attended Northwestern, and also during the time he taught at the same (1888-1900), there was, in fact, a two-year drawing class required of all students. E. E. Kowalke reports in *Centennial Story* :

> From the very beginning drawing was also one of the subjects in the curriculum. It was usually taught in the first or second high-school year, and many remember it as one of the most enjoyable and profitable courses. Among the men who taught drawing over the years were Dr. Hoenecke, Dr. Notz,Sr., Prof. Frank, Prof. Huth and Leonard Umnus.[19]

Notably absent from the list of art instructors is Koehler. In fact, Koehler did not formally teach anything at Northwestern that was related to the arts; his academic fields were classical language and history. The only course that we could possibly consider as being remotely related to the arts was the afore-mentioned penmanship class which he conducted. We would like to call attention to the fact that Koehler never formally

taught an art-related class. Apparently, though, art was never absent from his classroom; he made extensive use of original visual aids in his teaching of history, as he hints at in his *History of the Wisconsin Synod*:

> In regard to the other forms of art (architecture, sculpture, painting) a distinguished German educator once said: "The teacher of history must be able to draw." The highly developed facilities of what is known as visual education today have superseded that requirement. The writer practiced it for ten years at the College, then also made use of negative slides that appeared on the screen like crayon drawings on a blackboard.[20]

[19] Erwin Ernst Kowalke, *Centennial Story* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Northwestern Publishing House, 1965) p.174

[20] p. 220

When Koehler accepted the call to the Seminary in 1900 to replace Prof. Thiele, he found the long-sought forum for teaching the various art forms on a regular basis. That forum was the Liturgics class which he was assigned to conduct. The course description for Liturgics during Koehler's first ten years in Wauwatosa read as follows (from the 1909-10 catalog) :

> **Liturgics (Prof. Koehler).** History and fundamental principles of the form of the worship service. In connection with that, choral singing serves as an introduction to a knowledge and understanding of the best compositions (Erzeugnisse) in the fields of congregational hymns and church choral music, as well as their placement and use in the worship service. Classes I, II, and III meet for two hours weekly.

The course description for Liturgics in the catalog from the school years preceding 1909-10 does not contain such extensive references to indoctrination of music. Within 10 years after his arrival—and probably sooner than later—Koehler had beefed up the Seminary's commitment to instill an appreciation of art in the students. For this we are thankful to the Lord that he placed such an artistically talented man as J. P. Koehler in the Seminary environs, for even those with a rudimentary knowledge of the Seminary's operations usually know that music plays a prominent role.

It is common knowledge that Koehler had a special place in his heart for music and poetry[21], but what we would like to focus our attention on now is his devotion to painted art and his installation of an art history course into the Seminary's curriculum. This began in the fall of the 1917 - 1918 school year. The revised definition of the Liturgics course for that year relates that "lectures on the history of art" would be part of the course. At this time the Liturgics class still met twice a week.

Judging from what we have read concerning Koehler's views on art, one is forced to conclude that his art lectures also must have been extremely interesting, considering the vast knowledge of history he had stored in his head coupled with his excellent command of the English language. In his teaching of this class, Koehler was a bit ahead of his time in the concept of impacting as many senses in the learning process. Hence, to enable his students in their proficiency of art history, Koehler did an amazing thing: he reproduced between two and three thousand drawings and copies of masterpieces from the art world on three-by-five inch glass slides which he, in turn, would incorporate into his art lectures by showing them through a lantern projector.[22] *Faith-Life* reports concerning this vast collection that Koehler, "dared not leave the slide in the machine too long lest the oils melt from the heat of the projection lamp."[23]

Even with such advanced teaching methods and excellent material, Koehler's labor to open his underlings' young minds to the world of art went largely unappreciated. Rev. Phil. Hensel recounts than many of the students slept through the lectures—both Wisconsin Synod students and later Protest'ants. Prof. Koehler himself expressed deep regret that his work in this field was ignored, as alluded to in *Faith-Life:*

[21] cf. Kohler's History, p.221. Koehler took charge of the A Capella Choir of Milwaukee when their former director, Franz Salbach, left. It was Koehler's hope in doing this to expose the Seminary students to great choral music.

[22] cf. Koehler's History, p.220. Karl Koehler was reported to have assessed the number of these slides closer to 3000 than to 2000. In *Faith-Life* the number is cited at 2400 on a number of occasions.

[23] Vol. XL, No.3, p.19

> [One conversation] brought to mind J. P. Koehler's art course illustrated with 2400 lantern slide reproductions of famous works of art, laboriously painted by Koehler himself on the small pieces of glass used for the projection.... It was a grief of mind to him that the Conference never took an interest in these slides to the point of asking him to show them in the Neillsville years. They were given to Northwestern College, where they are at this time.[24]

Koehler's emphasis on the arts as part of a pastor's formal training not only met with indifference on the part of the students (a common malady in any educational institution) but provoked agitated reactions from August Pieper as well. One naturally has to be careful in jumping to unwarranted conclusions when only one side of the story is told (a maxim to be followed when attempting to properly assess any historical event), but in support of this we site the following passage that Koehler himself wrote in the article entitled, "As To Appreciation of Art," which was cited earlier:

> During that time I have had the same personal experience, that my indulgence of the artistic point of view in doctrinal discussions was attacked. And, of course, it didn't make for good feeling, when on several occasions an opponent, to refute my theological stand, would venture for comparison into the history and theory of painting and I then would have to elucidate the artistic point in question, which the opponent knew only by hearsay, and turn his objection into a refutation of his own argument and a confirmation of my position ... Later, when I , in my history course, introduced illustrated lectures on the history of the arts in general, including music, in order to demonstrate *ad oculos et aures* the development of the general mentality during the different periods of history, this was called *allotria.*
>
> These incidents go to show a lack of interest and of understanding of these vital educational matters, and it seems that this unintelligence is especially marked in our circles, while the outside world is at work energetically to revolutionize the arts in question and its educational methods.[25]

In the very same article, just paragraphs later, Koehler writes with a frustrated pen:

> In Europe, especially in Germany, you meet with a greater appreciation of these questions [concerning art]. There, everywhere, are the works of the art of centuries constantly before the eyes of everybody, and the public's understanding of these, together with that of poetry and music, has been fostered in schools and in private and public life through many generations. A comparatively thorough historical and theoretical knowledge in this respect is part of the equipment of every educated purpose abroad. Over there I have found, especially with architects, painters and sculptors, and with others in general, a willingness to accept the ideas which I have
> proposed in our circles for a generation.[26]

Perhaps a question that has been lurking around these recent pages without having been addressed is whether or not Koehler was justified in incorporating such an art history lecture class into the Seminary's curriculum. Was Koehler honestly seeking the betterment of the theological student by exposing him to art or merely satisfying a desire to pursue a personal bailiwick?

[24] Vol. XL, No. 3, p. 19. The note that these slides are presently at Northwestern is erroneous. Rev. Phil. Hensel personally viewed them and attempted to obtain them from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis around 1970. The collection was still apparently complete, though they were being stored in a rather insignificant room, under a table. We assume that they are still there.

[25] *Faith-Life*, Vol. IV, No. 5. p.4

[26] Ibid.

Time is often the test to prove a given course's mettle. Today, of course, there is nothing in the Seminary curriculum even remotely connected to art history. What happened?

Koehler taught his art history course from the years 1917 to his withdrawal from the classroom in 1929. The Liturgics course passed into the hands of Prof. Max Lehninger, who retained the art history portion of the course as long as he taught it. In 1935 Prof. Frederic Brenner took the reins of the Liturgics course, and he likewise followed the Koehler format. But although Brenner taught this class for a number of years, in the 1937 WLS catalog the art history portion of the course disappears from the course description:

> **Liturgics:** History of the forms of the service in the Christian Church and a critical examination of their value. Seniors and Middlers, one period per week. This course alternates with a course in Symbolics (Brenner). Four part singing of Lutheran chorales by the student body, one period per week. (1937-38 Seminary Catalog)

Art history has been absent from the Seminary's catalog ever since. Did Pieper and Brenner graciously wait a few years until the turmoil surrounding the dismissal of Koehler had settled down, and then finally remove any traces of his intellectual thought from the curriculum—this so called *allotria*?

In our opinion, no. One must keep in mind that 1936 saw the advent of Prof. Martin Franzmann at the Watertown campus, a highly-talented man who, like Koehler, had a deep interest in art. In 1938 Franzmann initiated teaching a comprehensive survey of art through the ages, a course designed to replace the drawing course in the pre-ministry track (though it continued to be a required course for those enrolled in the business track). Even after Franzmann left in 1946, the course continued to be required, and today is still being taught (as an elective, however) by Martin Franzmann's younger brother Gerhard W. Franzmann.

The demise of the Seminary's art history course, then, can be attributed to efficient co-operation between the faculties of North-western and the Seminary who strove to avoid repetitiveness in the training of the Synod's ministers. If the art history course was offered at Northwestern, there was no need for it at the Seminary.

What is interesting, though, is that the art history course, initiated by Koehler, is still intact. But the question still remains, was Koehler justified in subjecting his students to art lectures at the Seminary?

In this writer's opinion, we would say yes. Time has proved the course's worth, and we consider it very prudent of Koehler to notice this void in the classical education and fill it. Ideally an art history course belongs in a liberal arts college curriculum, and we're glad to see that it retains a place at Northwestern today. But during the years when such a class was not offered at Northwestern, we thank Prof. Koehler for opening the eyes (or, trying to pry open the sleepy eyes) of the theological students to the world around them, equipping them to have a broader base of knowledge with which to work in their primary task of dealing with people/preaching the Gospel. Was Koehler's interest in the course more personal than academic? Perhaps. But we would have to argue that there wasn't anyone more qualified to teach it and, besides, who ever taught a class that they hadn't the least amount of interest in? From our viewpoint, we are appreciative that he initiated the course; our pastoral training is the better for it.

IV. A Walk Through Koehler's Art Gallery

Koehler was not the first Synod professor interested in art. As mentioned earlier, Dr. Hoenecke was quite adept at drawing and painting. Prof. Herman Fleischer, who served at Northwestern from 1925-1954, likewise was an artist, and his large portrait of Luther still hangs in the Tower Room at the Seminary.

But Koehler's art deserves special consideration in view of the fact that he wrote much material concerning the

philosophy of art, i.e. what good art is, what subjects and styles are appropriate, etc. Since the proof of the pudding is in the eating, at this point we would like to bring our paper to a close by strolling through a sample gallery of works Koehler himself produced.

Before we begin, however, we really ought to say a few words about Koehler training and his preferences. Koehler's ability was, by and large, natural, although he did have a minor amount of formal training from a German artist from the years 1880-1882. According to Rev. Phil. Hensel, upon completion of his theological studies (at the age of 21), C. Philip Koehler, John's father, felt that he was too young to enter the ministry, and so he proposed that John wait two years. It was during this two year stay in Manitowoc that Koehler formally studied art. Apart from this brief stint, he had no other formal artistic instruction.

As for personal preferences in the art world, Koehler's affections were with Leonardo da Vinci. He enjoyed da Vinci's classical style and subject matter, and would often refer to da Vinci's works of art during the evening devotions at "The Manse" (the Koehler home in Neillsville). Koehler was also fond of Albrecht Durer's work, although he didn't especially care for the harsh lines which characterized Durer's paintings. In addition to this, Koehler disliked anything remotely associated with the Romantic movement in the art world, and, although the years of his formal art training fell in the midst of the Impressionistic movement, he did not enjoy Impressionism all that much. We find this strange, for the few pictures collected here depicting nature seem to have a bit of an Impressionistic tone to them.

As for mediums, Koehler's work was largely oil on canvas, though a lack of sufficient funds forced him to paint on composite board in the later years. As for colors, Koehler painted with palette consisting of largely darker, "earthy" colors. Although he employed the usual gamut of colors in his work, his pieces (in keeping with his philosophy) were far from gaudy, and the dark appearance of many of his pictures make one think that he strictly adheres to (as Rev. Hensel calls it) "the molasses school" of colors. Yet it was these colors, and the combinations thereof, that enabled Koehler to best capture the world at that time of the day which he loved most dearly: the softness of the early morning light. Other of his paintings, however, are brighter—naturally festive, we might say—capturing the radiance of the sun as it dances upon God's wonderful creation. Most of his portrait work is subdued, and often the subject has a peculiar look in the eyes, or appears to be deep in thought. All in all we would like to say that Koehler displays a wonderful talent in his paintings.

With that we shall begin. But first a note of thanks to the following people, who were most accommodating in helping me track down these original pieces of artwork, and who graciously supplied both information concerning the paintings and Color-Xerox prints/photos of them:

- Rev. Marcus Albrecht, Mindoro, WI
- Rev. Philemon Hensel, Manitowoc, WI
- Mr. Alvin Reich, Marshfield, WI
- Pastor Joel Gerlach, Wauwatosa, WI
- Mr. John Koelpin, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary
- Mrs. Lowell (Hilda Koehler) Nutter, Elysian, MN

Two Pencil Sketches

From the covers of *Faith-Life*, Vol. LXII, Nos. 5-6

1. The upper sketch is of the Rock River countryside around Watertown, WI, drawn in July of 1889, after Prof. Koehler had completed his first year as teacher and dean of men at Northwestern College.

2. The second of these sketches was done one month later, in August of 1889, and it entitled "Buffalo Lake from Montello Hill."

Portrait of an Arab

Oil on Composite Board (9.5" x 8") Owner: Rev. Marcus Albrecht

We begin with this painting because there really isn't much to say about it, other than the fact that Koehler enjoyed portrait painting of all sorts. The choice of subject material is somewhat interesting, and we would guess that Koehler was going on some pre-conceived notions in the production of this work; the complexion of the Arab is much too light to be convincing and, while the oranges, blues and tans fit in well in the Arab fashion world, the forest-green turban really is out of place.

Yet as one looks at this picture, there are a couple of interesting features. One is the presence of the wind, blowing through the man's beard, which forces him to pull his shawl more tightly about him with an unseen hand. Another is the eyes, which are weather-worn, yet full of wisdom.

The Oak Tree
Oil Owner: Mr. Joel Albrecht, New Ulm, MN

Although I originally had this paiting photographed in 1991, a much better reproduction of it has recently appeared on the cover of *Faith-Life.*

The owner is currently mayor of New Ulm, MN. The caption explaining this painting in *Faith-Life* stated that the paiting made an allusion to Ps. 1, where the tree of faith is planting beside the stream of God's holy Word, the only thing that can create, strengthen, and preserve faith in Christ.

The Indian Looking to the West

Oil on Canvas (14.5" x 9.5") Owner: Rev. Phil. Hensel

Koehler painted this picture in 1903 on the occasion of one of several visits to the Arizona mission fields. Koehler went there a number of times, often for health reasons. Though Koehler preferred morning light, this picture obviously is of sunset, and Koehler does a fine job of capturing the beautiful colors. The location is near Peridot.

Koehler painted this same scene a number of times, "so many," as Rev. Hensel relates, "that he wearied of painting it."

Koehler also, as mentioned before, disliked the Impressionists. Hence, Koehler's art is straightforward, with no abstractions or symbolic meanings. In fact, when a certain group of ladies visited Koehler at Neillsville and, upon viewing one of his copies of "The Indian Looking to the West," suggested that the painting really represented Koehler himself, posed stoically as the lone sentinel for true Lutheranism as the light of the Gospel was setting on the Lutheran Church, Koehler merely replied, "No, it's just a picture of an Indian looking at the sunset." Koehler never used art as a medium to attack the WELS. In fact, Koehler maintained that he never harbored vindictive feelings for the Synod. Recently, Ms. Irene Koehler, the youngest daughter of John Philip, told Rev. Hensel that as she sat there at the death-bed of Koehler, the old professor quietly told her, "We must not be vindictive. I have strove to not be vindictive." With that he recited the 5th petition in German and died.

Thiensville in the Fall

Oil on Composite Board (
13" x 9") Owner: Mr. Alvin Reich

One can tell from the picture that it does have a hint of impressionism in the trees. You can also see that Koehler incorporated brighter colors into this picture than the he did with most of his work.

Koehler normally wasn't fond of bright colors; they were too ostentatious for him, and he often denounces

gaudy artwork in his writings. Yet in his later years, as his eyesight was failing him, Koehler mentioned to Rev. Hensel, "I wish I had used brighter colors." This painting, "Thiensville in the Fall," employed the brightest array of colors Koehler ever used.

The painting was given to Mr. Alvin Reich and his bride Lucille on the occasion of their wedding in 1937.

View from The Manse

Oil on Composite Board (13" x 9") Owner: Mr. Alvin Reich

This painting, a scene looking out of the window of Koehler's studio in Neillsville, is the counterpart of "Thiensville in the Fall." In fact, this painting is on the reverse side of the former -- 2 paintings on one board! Here we see a practical side to Koehler's painting as well: when the Reich's needed a change of pace, they simply could flip the picture over to display another Koehler original.

Mr. Reich visited the Neillsville house frequently, Marshfield (his home) and Neillsville being neighboring towns. After graduating from Northwestern College in 1929, Mr. Reich attended Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary for only one year -- the 1929-30 school term. At that time he voluntarily withdrew. He is currently a member of Faith Lutheran Church of Marshfield, a Protes'tant congregation.

Christ in Gethsemane (Head Only)

Oil on Composite Board (6.5" x 8.5") Owner: Rev. Phil Hensel

This painting is one of Koehler's finest. It appeared in as an excellent reproduction on the front cover of *Faith-Life* in January of 1967. Copies were offered for many years following that issue.

The painting was a gift from Koehler to Rev. Hensel's mother, Mrs. Maximilian (Emily Eppling) Hensel, shortly before her death in 1933. The painting came into the possession of Rev. Hensel as a wedding gift in 1957. It had lain in a drawer undisplayed for almost 25 years. for Christ in Gethsemane reminds the viewer of how the Lord himself subjected himself to death, and in those last hours before the crucifixion he sought strength from above.

Koehler did a marvelous job with the eyes of Christ in this painting. Even on these duplicates one can see the mixture of seriousness, weariness and an attitude of questioning -- Christ searching for an answer as to why the plan of salvation must be accomplished in this way, while at the same time displaying a serene confidence in the will of his Father.

The motive behind the gift was obviously to provide comfort and strength for his dear friend as she prepared to depart this life. The subject is appropriate then,

Christ in Gethsemane (Full)

Oil on Canvas
Owner: Presently located at WELS Historical Institute, Salem Luth. Church of Milwaukee (N. 107th St.,)

This painting, at first glance, seems not to be a Koehler original. The scene certainly isn't, but this particular copy of it is. This larger work hung in St. John's of Wauwatosa for many years before the church was remodeled. At that time the painting was removed, stored in a closet and lost track of. When the present writer inquired as to the whereabouts of this Gethsemane painting, it was thought at first that it must still be in storage within the church. A little research by the pastor, however, revealed that the painting had be donated to the WELS Historical Institute a few years ago. I found the painting hanging inconspicuously in the balcony of the old Salem church.

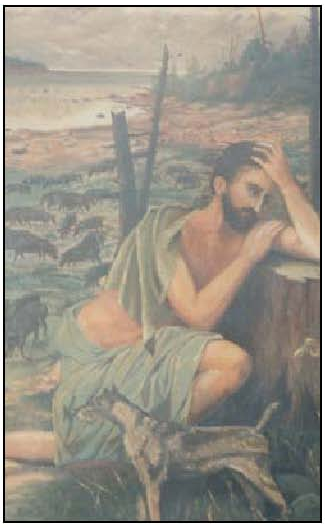
This is a fine reproduction of a familiar painting. The light streaming from heaven upon Christ's face is very well done. Although I could find no autograph on the painting, there is no doubt that it is an original Koehler, albeit a copy of another's work.

Triptych On "The Prodigal Son"

Oil on Canvas (162" x 66")
Owner: WELS Archives, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

This massive work -- perhaps Koehler's largest -- adorned the altar of St. John's Wauwatosa before it was removed and donated to the Seminary archives. The three paintings are of equal height, and they are designed to be displayed right next to each other. The two "wings" (the Prodigal Son in exile and the indignant older son) are both 3 ft. x 5.5 ft., while the center piece (the return of the Son) measures 7.5 ft. x 5.5 ft.

The original is well-done, but we ought not say that this ranks among Koehler's finest. We ought not fault him for this, for the purpose of the painting is entirely different from his other works. This is church art, and by the very nature of it the painting is intended to convey a message rather than display talent or attract attention to the colors. The painting has little artistic flair, but it is done nicely and undoubtedly impressed upon many church goers a visual image not merely of a well-known Bible story, but of forgiveness in action.



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Renaissance symbol -- the dog repres
cannot miss the dog's presence in the
first two of the three paintings. The
point of the piece is obviously to
emphasize God's free, unconditional
forgiveness.

Why "The Prodigal Son" as an altar-piece? As we said above, Koehler did not paint symbolically, so such thoughts as the proud older son representing the WELS are to be dismissed. However, this author would like to suggest that Koehler did in fact employ a standard Renaissance symbol -- the dog representing "faithfulness." " One cannot miss the dog's presence in the first two of the three paintings. The point of the piece is obviously to emphasize God's free, unconditional forgiveness.

The Mrs. Lowell Nutter Collection of Koehler's Art

The following ten pictures are all in the possession of Mrs. Lowell Nutter of Elysian, MN. Mrs. Nutter, nee Hilda Koehler, is the daughter of Kurt Koehler, Sr., the son of John Philip. We assume that she obtained these drawings and paintings from her father.

No explanations or other vital information concerning these paintings (including their official names) were included with the shipment of these photos, so I have taken the liberty to name them myself, merely for reference sake. Though such information was not received, nonetheless we are most grateful to Mrs. Nutter for her contribution.

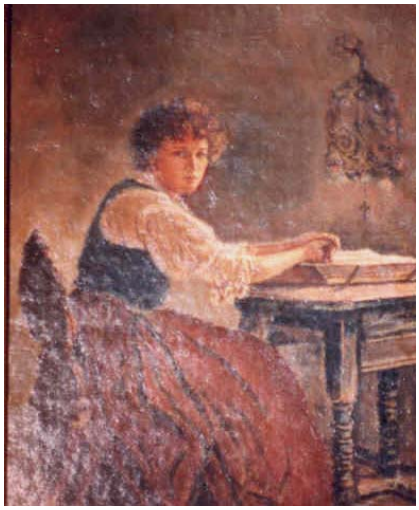
1. Christ As a Twelve Year-Old Boy

The inscription reads, "He came to his own, but his own received him not. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. " (in. 1:11-12)

2. Christ in Gethsemane

This pencil drawing graced the front cover of *Faith-Life* in March of 1968. The drawing was done during

the years of Koehler's inspectorship at Northwestern (1888-1900). This is a copy of an original done by an unknown artist. Faith-Life reports in that issue that Koehler was studying with a German artist in Milwaukee during the Northwestern years. Whether this is so or not could not be determined.



3. Woman Reading at a Table

This author believes this to be a copy of a semi-famous original, but I cannot verify that notion. At any rate, if it is a copy, it is a rather good one, and if it be original, that makes it all the better. Here Koehler uses subdued coloration and backlighting to create the mood that we have interrupted the reader.

4. The Fishermen

This small painting has a definite Impressionistic bend to it -- and I personally find that most attractive. One senses urgency in the strokes of the oarsman as the fishermen rush shore-ward ahead of the coming storm.

5. Portrait of a Young Woman

Who this woman is, we do not know. This work seems to be somewhat amateurish: the pastel-pink dress color heightens this. The picture is very unflattering of the subject, and it is clear that the woman has a disinterested look about her.

6. Portrait of a Man

This painting seems to compliment the former. This one is a little better that the one of the woman, but again, Koehler's style here seems to be more "cartoonish" than realistic.

7. Southwest Native

Hangs in the home of Mrs. Nutter. A pencil sketch.

8-9. Two Valleys[27]

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[27] Mrs. Nutter also possesses a painting similar to the one above, *Indian Looking to the West* (owned by Ph. Hensel). The photograph of Mrs. Nutter's version did not reproduce well, and thus is not included. See Appendix A for a list of

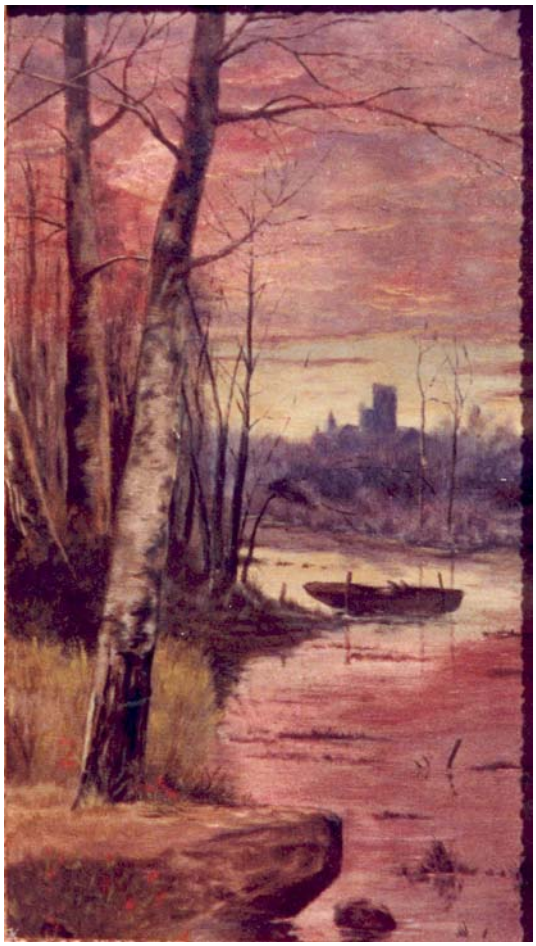
other known Koehler paintings.

Paintings Obtained from Karl Koehler, Jr. (Tuscon, AZ)[28]

Horses
Owner: Karl Koehler, Jr.

[28] Kurt Koehler, Jr., who is Mrs. Lowell Nutter's brother, also is reported to have a number of paintings. He resides in Phoenix, AZ. Cf. Appendix A

The Mountain Pass[29]
Owner: Karl Koehler, Jr.



River Bank in Fall
Owner: Karl Koehler, Jr.

[29] Many of these paintings have no official name, as far as I know. Thus the titles here are my own, often simplistically descriptive.

Appendix A

Other Known Koehler Paintings

1. There is a painting of the Wartburg Castle in the possession of Mr. Adolf Zeisler of Racine.

2. Kurt Koehler, Jr. -- Mrs. Lowell Nutter's brother -- of Phoenix is reported to have quite a few Koehler originals.

3. A Mr. L. Kirst of Beaven Dam, WI. has a Koehler original -- subject matter

unknown.

4. In addition to the portrait of the Arab, Rev. Marcus Albrecht has a painting entitled, "Die Dorfpolitiker" (The Town Politicians). Attempts were made to copy this, but the copies did not turn out.

5. Mrs. Martin Zimmerman of LaCrosse also owns a Koehler painting of the 12 year-old Jesus.

6. Mr. Paul Hartwig of Appleton, WI has a Koehler painting of the Seminary in Wauwautosa, WI. He obtained it from his father, Prof. em. Theodore J. Hartwig of New Ulm, MN. Prof. Hartwig is a grand-nephew of J. P. Koehler.

7. Koehler is believed to have done the cover artwork for the very first issue of *The Black and Red* back in 1897. In March 2004 I personally checked the out the old issues of *The Black and Red* in the MLC archives. The cover of the first volume is simple calligraphy, with the name of the magazine written at a diagonal up from L to R across the front, in red ink. There is no specific mention of the cover artist.

Appendix B

St. Peter's Church of Mischicot, WI

Background

St. Peter's of Mischicot was designed by Karl Koehler, the son of John Philip Koehler, and the building of the same was supervised by him from 1925-27. Koehler became involved in the project when his good friend, Ed. Zell, Sr., pushed for his members to erect "a real church." An estimate was given to Zell by Koehler: he could build a nice church in the old European style for c. $12,000. The project, however, became drawn out, and in the end the bill ran closer to $32,000 -- a situation that did not sit well with the members. Some felt Koehler himself was overpaid: Koehler was making between 60 cts. - $1/hr.

Design

St. Peter's is designed with a crucifix floor plan. Another interesting feature is that the steeple is over the altar area -- a trait found in German cathedrals such as the church in Ulm. There is also a full ambulatory that runs behind the altar area. The exterior is made entirely of red granite. When an addition was added in 1972, extreme care was taken to match the exterior of the new building with the original church. Due to the high cost of construction, simple pine appointments were built, since Zell thought it unwise to push for oak furniture right away. The original appointments are still in place.

Floor Plan of St. Peter's