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Government Publications
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JUN 28 1984 ✓

NOTES

Dallas Public Library

VOL. VIII, NO. 4

SUMMER 1984

GEORGE CATLIN: Ee-cha-zoo-kah-ga-wa-kon (Sioux for "The Medicine Painter")

George Catlin, America's prodigious painter, ethnographer, and explorer, acquired an early appreciation for Indians during his youth in the upper Susquehanna River Valley of Pennsylvania. His mother, Polly, had been taken prisoner by Indians as a girl and later ransomed; consequently, throughout his childhood Catlin heard tales of Indian wars and lore. He spent his youth "with books reluctantly held in one hand, and a rifle or fishing pole firmly and affectionately grasped in the other." He was an excellent marksman and rider, abilities that served him well in his later explorations. Catlin emerged a handsome man, with a warm smile and ingratiating personality, in spite of a long scar on his left cheek from a

childhood accident while playing with tomahawks. In 1817, at the age of 21, he entered law school at Litchfield, Connecticut, under the tutelage of Judge Tapping Reeve and James Gould, who had also taught two Vice-Presidents, six Cabinet members, and numerous Court Judges, senators and congressmen.

After passing his bar examinations, Catlin began practicing law in Lucerne, Pennsylvania; yet his heart was not in it. In 1820 he quit his practice, moved to Philadelphia, and established a reputation as a painter of miniatures and portraits. Although self taught, his work was well received, and in 1826 he was elected to the National Academy of Fine

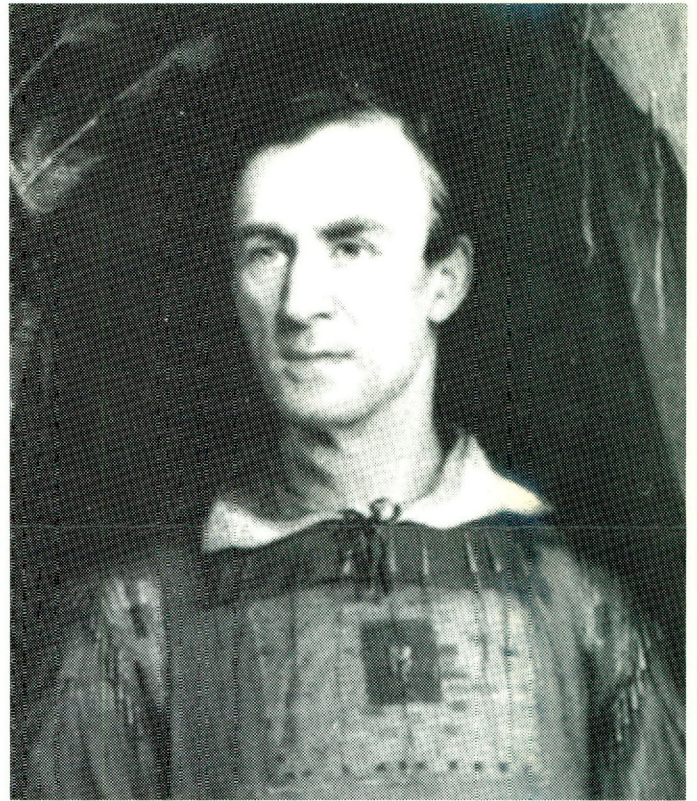
Indians Attacking
Grizzly Bears



Editor's Note: Periodically the Notes will highlight artifacts from the Museum's permanent collection. We currently possess a fine copy of Catlin's North American Indian Portfolio: Hunting Scenes and Amusements of the Rocky Mountains and Prairies of America, From Drawings and Notes of the Author Made During Eight Year's Travel Amongst Forty-Eight of the Wildest and Most Remote Tribes of Savages in North America. It is the second edition printed in London (1844) and contains six more plates than the first edition, totaling 31 tinted lithographs and measuring 23¾ by 17¼ inches. While the lithographs are not presently on display, we are proud to have this major work of George Catlin in the permanent collection. E.M.

Arts. He also courted and married Clarissa Gregory. The marriage brought him happiness and children. With commissions to paint such notables as Governor DeWitt Clinton of New York, his future as a portrait painter of the elite and wealthy was assured. In spite of his professional and personal successes, Catlin was “continually reaching for some branch of enterprise of the arts on which to devote a whole life-time of enthusiasm.” A delegation of Indians visiting Philadelphia from the “far west” on their way to see the “Great White Father” in Washington represented the catalyst which produced his life’s goal. His task was to rescue “from oblivion the looks and customs of the vanishing races of native men in America.”

Catlin left for St. Louis to propose his ideas for painting western Indians to General William Clark. As superintendent of Indian Affairs for the western tribes, Clark’s authorization and endorsement of his plan was crucial. The General befriended Catlin, allowing him to accompany Clark at treaty negotiations and introducing him to influential traders. In 1832 he traveled up the Missouri River on the steamboat Yellowstone owned by the American Fur Company. At Fort Union on the North Dakota-Montana border, Catlin painted and observed the nomadic buffalo-hunting Blackfoot, Crow, and Cree Indians. He returned down river by canoe with two other traders, recording the Indians he visited



George Catlin by William Fisk - 1849



Four Bears, Mandan Second Chief

along the way. His field oils from this trip are remarkable. He often averaged twenty miles a day by canoe or on horseback, transporting his canvases, boards, paints, and notebooks. Catlin traveled over 2000 miles, taking detailed notes and painting over 100 oils. He was able to produce an oil painting in a matter of minutes, and often created half a dozen portraits a day. Catlin’s paintings are vibrant, reflecting his enthusiasm and sympathy for his subjects; there is also a sense of urgency in his works, for he knew that time was running out for the Indians as he recorded them.

While among the Mandans of the upper Missouri he was one of the privileged few to view their O-kee-pa ritual and take notes. It was a four day ceremony of dances and initiations in which young men were hung by skewers thrust through the skin of their chests, shoulders, and thighs. The survivors of the O-kee-pa were treated with respect and honor throughout their lives. Catlin, like many others in the 19th century, suggested that the Mandan had been touched by western civilization, as they often had blue or grey eyes and fair hair. Their round buffalo hide boats reminded him of Welsh boats called coracles, and he felt that they were perhaps the descendants of Prince Madoc who had sailed west from north Wales in the 14th century. Catlin was one of the last people to record the Mandans and their unique culture. In the summer of 1837, smallpox practically exterminated the Mandans and many other plains tribes.

In 1834 Catlin accompanied the Leavenworth-Dodge Expedition from Fort Gibson on the Arkansas River to

establish contact with the then little-known Comanche, Kiowa, and Wichita Indians of northwestern Texas. He described the Comanches as unequaled by any other Indians on the continent as horsemen: "In stature the Comanches are rather low, often approaching corpulency . . . but the moment they mount their horses they seem at once metamorphosed - with ease and elegance in their movements." During 1835 and 1836 he traveled up the Mississippi to Fort Snelling in Minnesota and ultimately overland to the quarry site of the red stone that was the source for almost all the sacred pipes used by the various tribes he had studied. Catlin had the stone scientifically analyzed, and it was identified as a new mineral substance later named "Catlinite" in his honor.

was an immediate success. He lectured to Oxford faculty, dined with royalty, and was presented to Queen Victoria. While in England, in 1841, Catlin produced at his own expense Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indian, followed in 1844 by his North American Indian Portfolio. He also produced a second edition of the Indian Portfolio with additional prints. Although the works sold well, they were expensive to print, and he barely broke even. Since the novelty of Catlin's exhibition had begun to decline in England, he took the exhibit and troupe of Ioway Indians on to Paris in 1845. As in England, the exhibition was well received, culminating in an audience with the King and Queen of France. Shortly thereafter Catlin's wife died of



The Bear Dance

Always in financial distress, Catlin in the 1830's began exhibiting his Indian Gallery of paintings and ethnographic materials to rave reviews to New York, Washington, Philadelphia, and Boston. He also used every opportunity to speak eloquently for the plight of Indians, and was inadvertently critical of the United States Government policy towards them: ". . . the North American Indian, in his native state, is honest, hospitable, faithful, brave, warlike, cruel, revengeful, relentless - yet an honorable, contemplative, and religious being. The cruel policy of removing the tribes west of the Mississippi is one calculated to benefit the interests of the voracious land-speculators and Indian traders." Catlin tried to sell his entire collection to the United States Government for \$45,000, but his honesty had created political enemies, and he was unsuccessful. Subsequently, in 1838 he took his Indian Gallery to England. Displayed at Egyptian Hall, London, it

pneumonia, followed by the death of his son, leaving him utterly distraught with three children to care for and in a precarious financial position.

In 1852 a bill in the United States Congress to purchase the Catlin Indian Gallery was defeated by one vote, although friends such as Daniel Webster had spoken eloquently for its passage. Ironically, it was Jefferson Davis who cast the decisive vote. He had traveled with Catlin on the 1834 Leavenworth Expedition and admired the artist's work. Yet Davis also was a Southern Democrat and his party was for western expansion and Indian removal. Catlin had borrowed heavily against the Government's purchasing of his Gallery, and when the vote failed, his creditors began pressing hard. In desperation, he let Joseph Harrison, a wealthy Philadelphia industrialist, possess the collection as collateral for assuming Catlin's debts. The artist's children were taken back to

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America to live with his wife's relatives. At the age of 56, George Catlin was despondent, destitute, and almost deaf.

Yet a new saga was just beginning. Traveling under an assumed name and with a British passport, Catlin decided to depict the Indians of South America. He traveled with only his painting materials and a lone companion, a huge former slave named "Caesar Bolla." From 1853 to 1858 Catlin went up the Orinoco in Venezuela, across the jungles of Brazil, followed the Amazon to its source, and climbed the Andes to the Pacific Coast. Catlin's story is even more remarkable considering that he covered this much territory at his age, without modern medicines, scientific equipment, or financial assistance. He visited more primitive tribes than any other westerner on record. Catlin also went up the west coast of North America and across the Bering Sea to Siberia, all the while painting and taking notes. In 1861 he returned to Europe, rented a studio in Brussels, and wrote about his travels, publishing Last Rambles Amongst the Indians of the Rocky Mountains and the Andes in 1868. Catlin came back to America in 1870 after an absence of thirty years. Two years later, after being reunited with his daughters, he died of Bright's Disease (a kidney disorder) at the age of 74. George Catlin viewed Indians as human beings of both noble countenance and all too human frailties; he championed their right to dignity and cultural integrity.

There is an ironic epilogue to George Catlin's story. Ultimately, the heirs of Joseph Harrison donated Catlin's collection to the Smithsonian Institution. Unfortunately, the objects and paintings had been stored at the Harrison factory for years and were badly damaged from fire, water, and pests. Yet, if Catlin's Indian Gallery had actually been purchased earlier by the Government, the entire collection would have probably perished in the 1865 Smithsonian fire that devastated the works of his contemporaries.

Several individuals have recently made donations to the Museum. Mrs. Lois Jean Cooper Mayer of San Francisco, California, donated additional material to the already extensive collection of documents concerning the Wallace family (her grandparents) of Gay Hill, Texas. A collection of Texas Republic money was given to the Museum by Dr. N. Kent Horton of Brenham. Mr. Thomas Turner, the Assistant to the Chancellor at Baylor University, enhanced our Texana collection with the donation of two books: How We Lived, by W. R. Poage, and Ten More Texans in Grey, by W. C. Nunn. We sincerely appreciate the generosity of Mrs. Mayer, Dr. Horton, and Mr. Turner.

EXHIBIT SCHEDULE

The Showers-Brown Texana Collection
Through November 1, 1984

*Devil's Hatband: Barbed Wire
and Its Impact on the West*
September 1 – November 1, 1984

MUSEUM SCHEDULE

Open Daily
10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

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