



About George Catlin

“If my life be spared, nothing shall stop me short of visiting every nation of Indians on the Continent of North America.”

—George Catlin

George Catlin’s life (1796-1872) is a fascinating tale of a self-taught artist. Catlin was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, in 1796. Although trained as a lawyer in Connecticut, he defied his father’s wishes and chose to follow his dream of becoming a portraitist and history painter, and in particular, a painter of Native Americans. We can trace this interest back to the early 1820s when he witnessed a delegation of Indians visiting Philadelphia, where he was supporting himself by painting miniatures. Catlin wrote “a delegation of some ten or fifteen noble and dignified-looking Indians, from the wilds of the ‘Far West,’ suddenly arrived in the city, arrayed and equipped in all their classic beauty . . . tinted and tasselled off, exactly for the painter’s palette!” Catlin had discovered his calling.

Catlin yearned to record the native cultures on the Plains, rather than making studio portraits of the delegations that traveled east to meet with the U.S. government. In 1830, Catlin visited General William Clark, governor of the Missouri Territory and superintendent of Indian affairs in St. Louis and famous co-leader of the 1804 expedition with Meriwether Lewis. Clark became his mentor, showing Catlin his Indian museum, introducing him to the American Fur Trading Company, and taking him to visit Plains tribes. St. Louis became Catlin’s base of operations for five trips he took between 1830 and 1836, eventually visiting fifty tribes.

In 1832, Catlin took an epic journey that stretched over two thousand miles along the upper Missouri River. He visited eighteen tribes, including the Pawnee, Omaha, and Ponca in the south and the Mandan, Cheyenne, Crow, Assiniboine, and Blackfeet to the north. On his trips, Catlin wanted to record not only a way of life but also the noble faces of the American Indians he encountered. He came to understand that buffalo were essential to the Plains Indians’ culture. The animals provided food, clothing, shelter and a product they could sell or trade.

As Catlin traveled farther north in the territories, he encountered what he believed to be Indian tribes unspoiled by Euro-American civilization. He painted a number of striking portraits of the Mandan tribe that convey his view. “It is for the character and preservation of these noble

fellows that I am an enthusiast; and it is for these uncontaminated people that I would be willing to devote the energies of my life,” Catlin wrote.

The more time Catlin spent living with Native Americans, the more critical he became of U.S. government policies and of the corrupting influence of trappers, settlers and other non-native peoples on Plains Indian cultures. There was an urgency to Catlin’s quest, for the cultures he was so anxious to record were being irrevocably altered. His first trip to St. Louis coincided with the beginning of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which forced the migration of Indians from the land east of the Mississippi. The steamboat allowed more and more settlers to travel to the western frontier. Many of the tribes Catlin painted were being ravaged by smallpox. Catlin’s paintings and his journal became a crucial record of their customs.

Critics questioned the accuracy of Catlin’s depictions and sensational descriptions of the torturous Mandan O-kee-pa ceremony. The unique nature of Catlin’s record also caused him problems, since the smallpox epidemic left few Mandans to verify his account. Other early visitors to the northern Plains eventually confirmed the details, but questions about the veracity of Catlin’s work haunted him until his death.

When Catlin returned east in 1838, he assembled over 500 paintings and numerous artifacts into his Indian Gallery that he toured to major cities such as Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and New York. He hung his paintings “salon style”—side by side and one above another—to great effect. Visitors identified each painting by the number on the frame as listed in Catlin’s catalogue. Unfortunately, the Indian Gallery did not attract the paying public Catlin needed to stay financially sound, so in 1839 he took his Indian Gallery across the Atlantic for a tour of European capitals.

Catlin the showman and entrepreneur initially attracted crowds to his Indian Gallery in London, Brussels, and Paris. The French critic Charles Baudelaire remarked on Catlin’s paintings, “M. Catlin has captured the proud, free character and noble expression of these splendid fellows in a masterly way.”

Increasingly sensational aspects such as mock battles and staged publicity stunts were incorporated into the show to attract visitors. Catlin initially included live grizzly bears, but they proved so destructive they were replaced with paintings. Even more controversial was the addition of American Indians, members of the Ojibwe and Iowa tribes, who danced and sang. Catlin was accused of exploiting the Indians, but he defended his actions by claiming he was rescuing them from unscrupulous promoters.

By 1852, Catlin was in such financial trouble that he had to sell his original Indian Gallery to meet his debts. Industrialist Joseph Harrison purchased the collection, which then languished in his steam boiler factory in Philadelphia. Catlin tirelessly lobbied the U.S. government to purchase his Indian Gallery to no avail. In 1870, exhausted, bankrupt, and a widower, Catlin returned to the United States.

In 1872, Catlin came to Washington, D.C., at the request of his friend Joseph Henry. Henry, the first secretary of the Smithsonian, invited Catlin to take a studio in the tower of the Smithsonian “Castle” and to exhibit some of his work. Catlin died that same year. Seven years later, Smithsonian Secretary Spencer Baird, Henry’s successor, approached Sarah Harrison, Joseph Harrison’s widow, about donating the collection to the Smithsonian, which she did in 1879. The Smithsonian now holds many of Catlin’s paintings, artifacts, papers, maps and books, thereby creating this unique historic resource.