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“George Catlin’s Indian Gallery” On View at the Renwick Gallery

The installation “George Catlin’s Indian Gallery,” on view through April 26, 2009 in the Renwick Gallery’s Grand Salon, celebrates a crown jewel in the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s permanent collection—the nearly complete surviving set of Catlin’s Indian Gallery painted in the 1830s and 1840s. It features 287 paintings, portraits, landscapes and scenes of American Indian life. This installation follows the critically-acclaimed exhibition “George Catlin and His Indian Galley” on view at the Renwick Gallery from Sept. 6, 2002 through Jan. 20, 2003.

“‘Catlin’s Indian Gallery’ tells part of the story of America’s frontier and the cultures of the Native Americans who lived there,” said Elizabeth Broun, the museum’s Margaret and Terry Stent Director. “This installation of works from one of the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s prized collections is displayed as George Catlin intended.”

The Grand Salon installation, with paintings hung floor to ceiling, recalls the Indian Gallery as Catlin displayed it in the 1840s while touring Europe. A facsimile of the booklet Catlin produced for his tour to assist visitors in identifying each painting has been re-created for this installation. Each painting has a number on its frame that corresponds with an entry in the booklet, which lists the title of the painting and an anecdote about the subject or the place where it was painted. George Gurney, deputy chief curator, selected the paintings in the installation.

George Catlin (1796–1872), a lawyer-turned-painter, decided in the 1820s that he would make it his life’s work to record the life and culture of American Indians living on the Plains. In 1830, Catlin visited Gen. William Clark, governor of the Missouri Territory, superintendent of Indian affairs in St. Louis and famous co-leader of the 1804 expedition with Meriwether Lewis. Clark became Catlin’s mentor, showing him his Indian museum, introducing him to the American Fur Trading Co. and taking him to visit Plains tribes. In 1832, Catlin made an epic journey that stretched more than 2,000 miles along the upper Missouri River. St. Louis became Catlin’s base of operations for the five trips he took between 1830 and 1836, eventually visiting 50 tribes.

Catlin's quest turned into a lifelong obsession that shaped his subsequent travels and the course of his life. In pursuit of his goals, this artist also became an explorer, historian, anthropologist, geologist, collector, journalist, author, lecturer and promoter. Catlin's dream was to sell his Indian Gallery to the U.S. government so that his life's work would be preserved intact. After several failed attempts to persuade various officials, he toured with it in Europe in the 1840s, where he often featured Native Americans dancing, creating the earliest version of what would later become the Wild West show. Tragically, he lost his original Indian Gallery due to personal debts in 1852. He then spent the last 20 years of his life trying to re-create his collection.

In 1872, Catlin came to Washington at the invitation of Joseph Henry, the first secretary of the Smithsonian. Until his death later that year, Catlin worked in a studio in the Smithsonian's "Castle." A Philadelphia collector's widow donated the original Indian Gallery—more than 500 works—to the Smithsonian in 1879.

Book

The Smithsonian American Art Museum co-published a catalog titled "George Catlin and His Indian Gallery," with W.W. Norton & Co. The book includes 120 color plates with extended captions by Joan Troccoli; essays by Brian Dippie, Christopher Mulvey and Therese Heyman; an introduction by W. Richard West, director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian; and a preface by Elizabeth Broun. The book is available at the Renwick Gallery store and the museum's online shop for \$39.95.

Free Public Program

A gallery talk by Gurney will take place in the Grand Salon Thursday, April 23, at noon.

About the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Smithsonian American Art Museum celebrates the vision and creativity of Americans with approximately 41,500 works of art in all media spanning more than three centuries. The museum's branch for craft and decorative arts, the Renwick Gallery, is located on Pennsylvania Avenue at 17th Street N.W. It is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., except Dec. 25. Admission is free. Metrorail station: Farragut North (Red line) and Farragut West (Blue and Orange lines). Museum information (recorded): (202) 633-7970. Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 633-5285 (TTY).

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