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Nov. 28, 2005

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

The installation “George Catlin’s Indian Gallery,” on view indefinitely 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. The installation features 287 paintings, portraits, landscapes and scenes of American Indian life.

“‘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 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.

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. "Frontier Visionary: George Catlin and the Plains Indians," a VHS tape produced by the Smithsonian American Art Museum and Northern Light Productions in partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts, is available for \$24.98. To order, please visit AmericanArt.si.edu or call the Renwick shop at (202) 357-1445.

The Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum is dedicated to exhibiting American crafts and decorative arts from the 19th to the 21st century. The Renwick is located on Pennsylvania Avenue at 17th Street N.W., near the Farragut North (Red line) and Farragut West (Blue and Orange lines) Metrorail stations. Museum hours are from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. daily. Admission is free. Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 357-1729 (TTY). Recorded information: (202) 275-1500. Please visit the museum's award-winning Web site at AmericanArt.si.edu.

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