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George Catlin and His Indian Gallery

George Catlin and His Indian Gallery, an exhibition of approximately 120 paintings and objects related to Native American Plains Indians, opens October 10, 2004 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Drawn from the Smithsonian American Art Museum's holdings of art and artifacts painted and collected by Catlin, the exhibition is the first extensive display of the American painter's work in more than a century. The exhibition takes its name from Catlin himself, who assembled his paintings and artifacts into a show he called his Indian Gallery and toured with it in the United States and Europe. When Catlin was painting, he was a controversial, contemporary artist who faced head on one of the most important issues in American history -- the fate of indigenous Americans during 19th-century westward expansion. *George Catlin and His Indian Gallery* will be on view in the Caroline Wiess Law Building, 1001 Bissonnet Street, through January 17, 2005. (right: George Catlin (1796-1872), *Shon-ta-yi-ga, Little Wolf. a Famous Warrior*, Iowa, 1884, oil on canvas, 29 x 24 inches, Smithsonian American Art Museum. Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr., 1985.66.521)

"*George Catlin's Indian Gallery* is a great artistic account of a self-taught American artist who embarked on a western crusade to see and record the life and customs of the American Plains Indians," said Peter C. Marzio, MFAH director. "No other artist up to that point in history had devoted his life and art to the American West and to documenting the Plains tribes. The exhibition conveys Catlin's regard for the rich heritage of these tribes and inspires our admiration for it today."

George Catlin (1796-1872), a lawyer turned painter, decided in the 1820s, after encountering a delegation of Indians visiting Philadelphia (where he worked painting miniatures), that he would make it his life's work to record the "manners and customs" of American Indians living on the Plains. From 1830 to 1836, Catlin traveled thousands of miles, following the trail of the Lewis and Clark expedition, visiting 50 tribes living west of the Mississippi River in territory representing present day Oklahoma to North Dakota.

"With few exceptions, Catlin's paintings have long been understood as important ethnographic resources but only relatively recently have they been appreciated as powerful works of art," said Emily Ballew Neff, curator of American paintings and sculpture. "Visitors to this exhibition will see how Catlin's dramatic brushwork created compelling portraits of Plains Indians on the brink of tragic change." (right: George Catlin (1796-1872), *Stu-mick-o-súcks, Buffalo Bull's Back Fat, Head Chief Blood Tribe, Blackfoot/Kainai*, 1832, oil on canvas, 29 x 24 inches, Smithsonian American Art Museum. Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr., 1985.66.149)

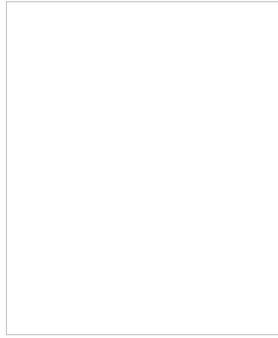
Catlin was the first artist to record the Plains Indians in their own territories. He admired them as the embodiment of the Enlightenment ideal of "natural man," living in harmony with nature. However, the paintings in his Indian Gallery also reveal the fateful encounter of two different cultures in a frontier region undergoing dramatic transformation. As Catlin spent time among Native Americans, he became more critical of U.S. government policies and the influence of settlers on native culture. The steamboat allowed increasing numbers of settlers to travel to the western frontier, and many of the tribes Catlin painted were being ravaged by smallpox. Fearing these American Indian cultures would eventually be destroyed, Catlin was driven to record them in his paintings as a way of educating future generations.

As Catlin traveled farther north, he encountered what he believed to be Indian tribes unspoiled by European civilization. He said of the Mandan tribe, "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."

Many of the Indians that Catlin painted were the warrior leaders of their tribes. Among the works in the exhibition is a

commanding portrait of *Stu-mick-o-súcks, Buffalo Bull's Back Fat, Head Chief, Blood Tribe* (1832), named from the best meat cut of the bison and chief of the Blackfoot, a tribe of the northernmost Plains. Catlin considered the people of the northern Plains the least corrupted by white contact, and he helped establish their image as nature's sovereign nobility in Europe and in America.

Another painting in the exhibition, *Máh-to-tóh-pa, Four Bears, Second Chief, in Full Dress* (1832), depicts a Mandan chief wearing a shirt made from two skins of mountain sheep decorated with drawings of important war victories, deerskin leggings, and a headdress of eagle feathers topped with buffalo horns. Catlin wrote that the chief had "grace and manly dignity," when he arrived for his portrait sitting. He rewarded this impressive demeanor by creating a likeness of the chief that has become one of the most influential American portraits ever painted. Among the artifacts on view in the exhibition is a man's painted hide shirt similar to the one this chief wears. Other artifacts include a cradle and ball sticks used for playing lacrosse. (right: George Catlin (1796-1872), *Máh-to-tóh-pa, Four Bears, Second Chief, in Full Dress*, Mandan/Numakiki, 1832, Oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr., 1985.66.1280



Catlin painted fewer women than men, a fact explained by their relatively secondary place in Indian society. The young daughter of an Arikara chief, however, portrayed in *Pshán-shaw, Sweet-scented Grass, Twelve-year-old Daughter of Bloody Hand*, 1832, possessed status in the tribe and the means to dress in "a robe of the young buffalo's skin, tastefully and elaborately embroidered" in northern Plains style.

On his journey, Catlin not only painted the Indians he encountered, but also captured scenes of the land on which they lived. His dreamy views of sunlit bluffs on the Upper Missouri, as in *River Bluffs, 1320 Miles above St. Louis*, 1832, preserve a now lost landscape. Indians had shaped this landscape by setting fires that curbed tree growth. When the Indians were gone, so were what Catlin described as "beautiful clear-cut outlines of these billowy slopes."

Catlin marveled at the huge buffalo herds that roamed the Plains, but he predicted that the buffalo would soon be extinct, ensuring the extinction of the Plains Indians' way of life as well. Already in Catlin's time, Plains Indians were killing bison in increasing numbers to take advantage of trading opportunities. Relentless expansion across the West also took a heavy toll on herds as demand increased for meat to feed railroad construction crews, hides to buffer machinery, and bones to manufacture china and fertilizer. Rapid consumption of buffalo also served a broader U.S. government policy of killing bison to disintegrate native cultures further and increase their dependence on the government. Catlin's grisly portrait, *Dying Buffalo, Shot with an Arrow, 183233*, is a reminder of the mortality of both the bison and the Plains Indians.

Catalogue

George Catlin and His Indian Gallery, a book featuring 120 color plates and three scholarly essays, accompanies the exhibition. It was published by the Smithsonian and W.W. Norton & Co., and is available in the MFAH Shops.

Organizer

George Catlin and His Indian Gallery is organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Tour Schedule

- The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, February 7 - April 18, 2004
- The Autry Museum of Western Heritage, Los Angeles, May 9 - August 4, 2004
- The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, October 10, 2004 - January 16, 2005
- Smithsonian's George Gustav Heye Center, National Museum of the American Indian, New York City, February 26 - September 5, 2005.

Editors note: RLM readers may also enjoy;

- [George Catlin and His Indian Gallery \(12/22/03\)](#)
- [Honoring the Legacy of Lewis and Clark: Native American Art and the American West \(2/13/03\)](#)

- [George Catlin and His Indian Gallery \(7/31/02\)](#)
- [After Lewis and Clark: Explorer Artists in the American West \(12/8/00\)](#)
- [Catlin, Curtis, McKenney and Hall: Peoples of the Western Land \(10/11/99\)](#)
- [Catlin and the Traditions of Western Art \(11/97\)](#)
- [George Catlin's Obsession](#)
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