

# Letter to, and Paintings by, George Catlin

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**Letters received and sent by Secretary of War** Lewis Cass in the 1830s reveal much about relations between the U.S. government and Native Americans. In the immediate aftermath of the Indian Removal Act, signed into law on May 28, 1830, by President Andrew Jackson, some letters came from interpreters and school teachers seeking payment for their work; others dealt with trade issues; some addressed the exchange of ceremonial gifts; and still others came from individuals requesting government assistance with a variety of matters involving Native Americans and access to the West.

In January 1832, Pennsylvania-born artist George Catlin (1796-1872) sent such a letter to Secretary of War Cass. Writing from St. Louis, Missouri, Catlin told Cass of his plans to travel through “Indian Country” for the purpose of painting portraits of Indians and requested a letter of support that he could give to the various government officials, known as Indian agents, whom he would meet along his proposed journey. On February 18, 1832, Cass responded from his office in Washington, D.C. In this single-page letter, the Department of War’s copy of which is featured in this article, Cass told Catlin that his plans were “laudable.” He further recommended that Catlin show Cass’s letter to the Indian agents, and indicated confidence that they would be helpful.

But Cass was not the first cabinet official to whom George Catlin had written in his quest to travel west. Although he was a little-known, aspiring portrait painter who had been trained as a lawyer, Catlin had been thinking since at least 1826 of a way he could finance a Western expedition. Perhaps inspired by viewing a delegation of Native Americans visiting Philadelphia in the early 1820s, Catlin had written to one of Cass’s predecessors

in 1829 requesting a government position working among the Indians. This request did not materialize, but Catlin did not give up. He first traveled to the West against his family’s wishes in 1830, when he set out for St. Louis and befriended General William Clark, governor of the Missouri Territory, superintendent of Indian Affairs in St. Louis, and the famous co-leader of the expedition with Meriwether Lewis. Clark was in charge of the federal government’s relations with 35 western tribes.<sup>1</sup> In this position, he invited Catlin to travel with him to visit Native Americans.

To manage the government’s relations with the tribes, Clark had set up a network of Indian agents, mostly former Army officers, who reported to him, but often lived among the Native Americans. These agents were vital in carrying out government policies and communicating with the Indians. They also became important to George Catlin, as they were able to assist him with transportation, supplies, and translation services on his numerous trips to the West between 1830 and 1836.

During this six-year period, Catlin used St. Louis as his base of operations. It was there that he captured one of the earliest

views of the city, *St. Louis from the River Below* (see p.176). In this detailed landscape, Catlin positioned the American Fur Company steamboat *Yellowstone* in the center, with the bustling city of 15,000 inhabitants along the horizon. It was also there that on March 26, 1832, he boarded the *Yellowstone* with fur traders and Indians for the 2,000-mile trip from St. Louis to Fort Union. As he began the first of several long sojourns deep into the frontier, this time traveling to the mouth of the Yellowstone River at the western border of present-day North Dakota, it is likely that Catlin had his letter from Cass with him. He may have also begun taking copious travel notes at this time, which were later published in 1841 as *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians*.

The American Fur Company operated Fort Union as a fortress against possible Indian attack and as a well-appointed outpost and major trading post. This became Catlin’s base for a month or so, during which time he found Indians whom he described as, “undoubtedly the finest looking, best equipped, and most beautifully costumed of any on the Continent.”<sup>2</sup> It was here where Catlin painted *Stumick-o-súcks, Buffalo Bull’s Back Fat, Head Chief, Blood Tribe* (See p.175). In this waist-length portrait, Catlin placed Buffalo Bull’s Back Fat (named after a prized cut of bison) slightly to the left of the center of the canvas. His facial features are almost symmetrical, with eyes that stare out at the viewer, accentuated by a piece of hair hanging to the

## TEACHING ACTIVITIES

**1** Distribute copies of the featured document and the three works of art to students. Begin by focusing attention on the letter. Ask one student to read the letter aloud while the others follow along. Lead a class discussion by posing the following questions: What type of document is it? What is the date of the document? Who was the intended recipient? Who created it? For what purpose? Who would have possessed the original? Next, direct students to study each of the works of art. Ask them to describe what they see. Finally, encourage them to hypothesize what the works of art have to do with the letter. Explain that the paintings are among hundreds completed by George Catlin, depicting scenes and individuals whom he met on his journey to the American West, about which he had written to Secretary Cass.

**2** Provide students with information from the background essay about George Catlin and his work. Or suggest that they find out more from the Smithsonian American Art Museum's website at [americanart.si.edu](http://americanart.si.edu)—by selecting “Search Collections,” clicking on the “Artists” tab, and inputting “George Catlin.” Encourage them to take on the role of Catlin and draft the letter he wrote to Secretary Cass in January 1832, prompting the featured response. Invite volunteers to share their letters with the class.

**3** Provide students with a blank map of the United States. Ask them to trace the route taken by the *Yellowstone* on its journey up the Missouri River from St. Louis to Fort Union in 1832. Direct them to label the various forts that Catlin may have visited along the way. These include Fort Leavenworth, Fort Pierre, Fort Clark, and Fort Union. Divide students into four groups and assign each group to conduct research on a fort (Note: The National Park Service's website, [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov), contains links to much information), and consider what Catlin might have experienced or

seen at the fort. Ask a volunteer from each group to share their findings with the class. As an extension, encourage them to visit the Smithsonian American Art Museum's “Catlin Classroom” website at [catlinclassroom.si.edu](http://catlinclassroom.si.edu). Direct them to select “Catlin's Quest” campfire story and locate paintings that he might have created at or near their fort.

**4** Ask students to assume the role of one of the Indians whose portrait they saw while conducting research for activity #3. Invite students to write a journal entry describing the experience of having been the subject of a painting and their reaction to not having the opportunity to see the finished portrait (since Catlin completed most of his works in his studio). Invite student volunteers to share their entries with the class and lead a class discussion asking students to consider to what extent they think Catlin's works of art were accurate representations of the people whom he met and the places he visited.

**5** Remind students that Indian agents were crucial in carrying out government policy with the Indians and helpful to George Catlin on his journeys into the American West. Encourage students to conduct research into the various roles played, and skills possessed by Indian agents in the mid-nineteenth century and to create a job description for an Indian agent.

**6** Locate the lesson plan entitled “Making Treaties and Weaving Wampum” on the “Catlin Classroom” website at [catlinclassroom.si.edu](http://catlinclassroom.si.edu). After introducing students to its content, lead a class discussion asking the students to consider to what extent Cass's choice of the word “laudable” in his response to Catlin was ironic given the government's Indian policies at the time.

top of his nose. Buffalo Bull's Back Fat's status as a Blackfoot chief is suggested in both the clothing that he wears and objects that he holds—perhaps emblems of authority. Indians had no tradition of individual portraiture, but they may have recognized how Catlin used a leader's stance, clothing, headdress, and symbolic objects to make him distinct, even though he used European American art traditions to portray chiefs and leaders. These ideas were no doubt carried with the artist during his travels west along with sketchbooks, canvas, brushes, and pigments.

While in the Upper Missouri territories, the prolific artist may have worked on five or six paintings a day. In the case of portraits, Catlin tried to capture his sitter's likeness as faithfully as possible. He did not do a lot of preliminary sketching but instead drew outlines of the figure on canvas with broad brushstrokes and then added some dimension and detail. Depending upon how much time was afforded Catlin, he might fill in details with a limited palette of unmixed pigments until he had enough of the color scheme so that he could return to it later. Pigment was applied in thin brushstrokes so that it could dry quickly and not crack when the canvas was rolled for storage. Painting would later be completed during the winter months, in Catlin's studio back east. This working method may account for his vast output. On this 1832 voyage alone, Catlin painted more than 170 hunting scenes, ceremonies, games, landscapes, and portraits of the people whom he met.

Among them were the Mandan, whose way of life so intrigued the artist that he devoted more than half of the first volume of *Letters and Notes* to describing them. The Mandan, in turn, were no doubt impressed by the artist's abilities as they apparently lined up to have their portraits painted (based on the number of such works Catlin completed). Catlin's stay at Fort Clark, near the Mandan village, lasted about a month. Here he painted many scenes such as *Bull Dance*, *Mandan O-kee-pa Ceremony* (see p.174). In the

*continued on page 176*

Post. To G. S. Hubbard, Esq.,  
 Department of War,  
 February 18. 1832.  
 Dawville, Illinois,

Sir,

I have received your application to be appointed Commissioner to treat with the Indians residing in Illinois and Indiana for the extinguishment for their land titles, and in answer have to observe, that should the bill pass, your application as well as all others for such an appointment, will be duly considered. -

Very respectfully &c  
 Lewis Cass.

Post. To Mr. George Catlin,  
 Department of War,  
 February 18. 1832.  
 St. Louis, Mo.

Sir,

I have received your letter of the 29. ult; and in answer have to observe, that so far as your object in visiting the Indian Villages is explained in your communication, I think it laudable, and every facility should be afforded you in its promotion.

You can show this letter to the Indian Agents you may meet in your tour who I am confident will render you every assistance in their power.

Very respectfully &c.  
 Lewis Cass.

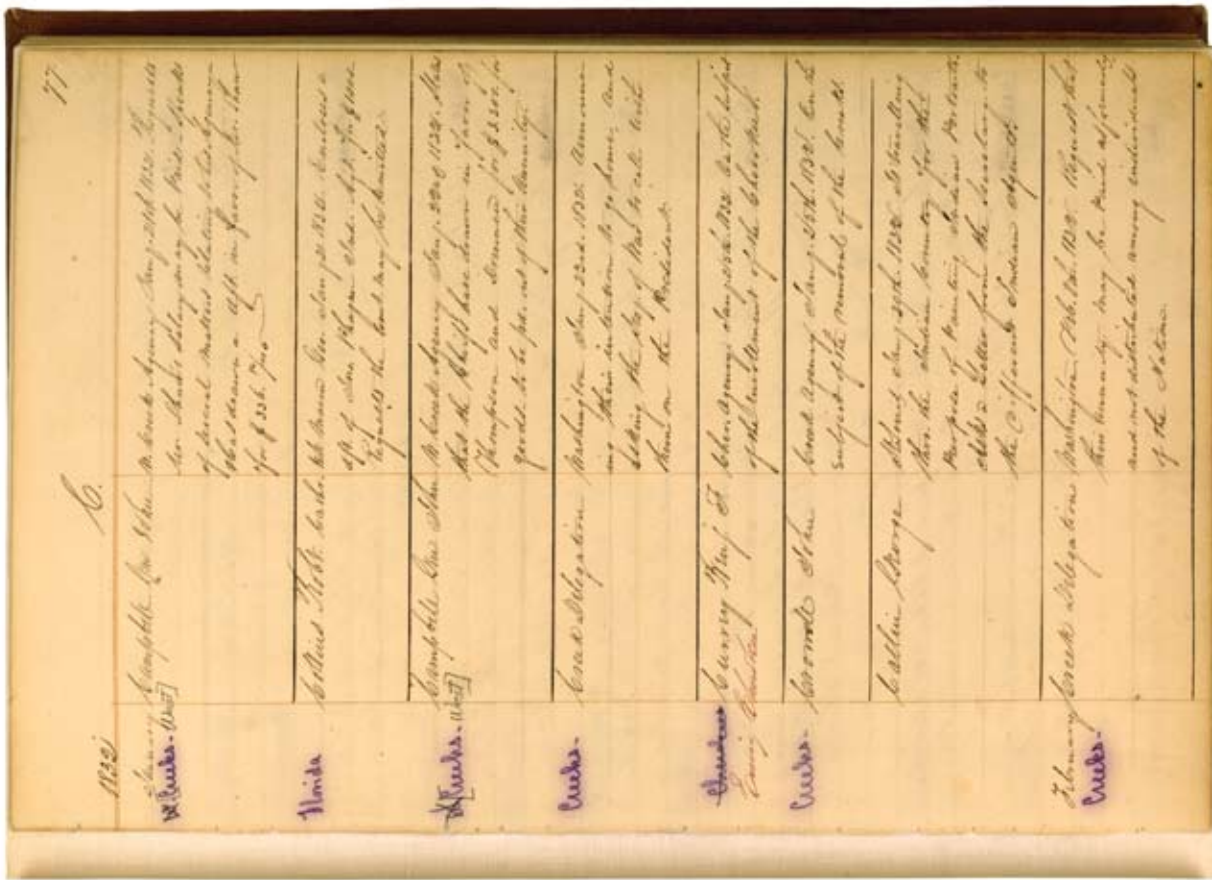
Post. 127. To His Excellency  
 Ante - 114. Lewis Cass.

Sir: Secretary of War:

Dept. of War - Off: Indian Affairs.  
 February 18. 1832.  
 It is desirable to procure four pair of Honoumna Pistols from the Ordnance Department, to be presented by the President to the Indian Chiefs now here on a visit, which I respectfully ask you to authorize. -

Very respectfully &c. Albert Hoerning. -





Page from a register of letters sent to the Secretary of War indicating the receipt of Catlin's letter.

## George Catlin at the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The majority of works Catlin painted during his travels in the West between 1830 and 1836 are in the permanent collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Experts differ as to where Catlin was each year and which groups he painted when, but they are in agreement that he covered an amazing amount of territory west of the Mississippi (almost 2,000 miles), and his output was prodigious (about 325 portraits and 200 scenes of American Indian life). You can view these works in person in Washington, D.C.; by searching the museum's website, [americanart.si.edu](http://americanart.si.edu); or by using the award-winning educational website [CatlinClassroom.si.edu](http://CatlinClassroom.si.edu). This interactive site compiles paintings, historical documents, and commentary from contemporary scholars and Indian leaders so you can explore the intersections of two cultures, both in Catlin's time and today.



George Catlin, *Bull Dance, Mandan O-kee-pa Ceremony*, 1832, oil on canvas, 23¼ x 28 in., Smithsonian American Art Museum





George Catlin, *Stu-mick-o-súcks, Buffalo Bull's Back Fat, Head Chief, Blood Tribe*, 1832, oil on canvas, 29 × 24 in., Smithsonian American Art Museum

foreground of this painting, he focused on one portion of the ceremony. Here, participants of the Bull Dance imitate the movements of a buffalo—each wearing an entire buffalo skin, head, horns, hooves, and tail.

Although Catlin was not the first non-Indian to witness this ceremony, he was one of the first to paint its various components. When, later, he began to exhibit this and other works, critics questioned their authenticity. However, the significance of this work lies in the fact that it was rare, firsthand documentation. After smallpox was introduced to the Northern Plains in 1837, about 90 percent of the Mandans died, and there were few left who could verify his account.

When Catlin returned east in 1837, he had assembled more than 500 paintings and a large collection of Indian objects. In the spring, Catlin shipped the collection, which became known as his “Indian Gallery,” to Albany, New York, for exhibition. After this trial run, he exhibited the Indian Gallery in several major U.S. cities to much acclaim. Few visual representations of either Indians or the landscape west of the Mississippi had been circulated at that time, and the exhibition drew large and curious crowds. Catlin left for Europe in November 1839, and in 1840, the Gallery was on view in London and eventually Paris and Brussels. While touring there, however, Catlin was in such financial trouble that he almost lost the entire Gallery. His desire to keep the collection intact was so strong that he re-created more than 400 paintings and undertook further travels in the 1850s to paint hundreds of additional works in North and South America. Catlin believed that the Indian Gallery was a national treasure, and had tried since 1838 to have the U.S. government purchase it. However, his debts caught up with him, and Joseph Harrison, a wealthy American collector, paid the artist’s creditors in 1852 and took possession of the collection. Although George Catlin did not live to see his wish fulfilled, the majority of works in the origi-



George Catlin, *St. Louis from the River Below*, 1832-1833, oil on canvas; 19<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 26<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in., Smithsonian American Art Museum

nal Indian Gallery had been kept intact, and they were donated to the Smithsonian Institution seven years after his death in 1872 as a gift from Harrison’s widow. These works are now in the permanent collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. 🌐

#### Note

1. The federal government referred to groups of Native Americans as “tribes.” This word suggested that members of each group shared descent, territory, history, culture, and political authority. This was not true for all of the people whom Catlin encountered. Many were members of bands or extended families.
2. George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1973), 23.

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#### Note about the Featured Document

The Department of War’s copy of the letter from Cass to Catlin is preserved by the National Archives among the *Letters Sent by the Office of Indian Affairs 1824–1881*, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75. It is reproduced on National Archives Microfilm Publication M21, *Letters Sent by the Office of Indian Affairs, 1824–1881*, roll 8, page 118.

## For Additional Reading

Catlin, George. *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians*. 2 vols. London, 1841. Reprint, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1973.

Dippie, Brian W. et al. *George Catlin and His Indian Gallery*. New York: Smithsonian American Art Museum and W.W. Norton & Company, 2002.

Truettner, William H. *The Natural Man Observed: A Study of Catlin’s Indian Gallery*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979.