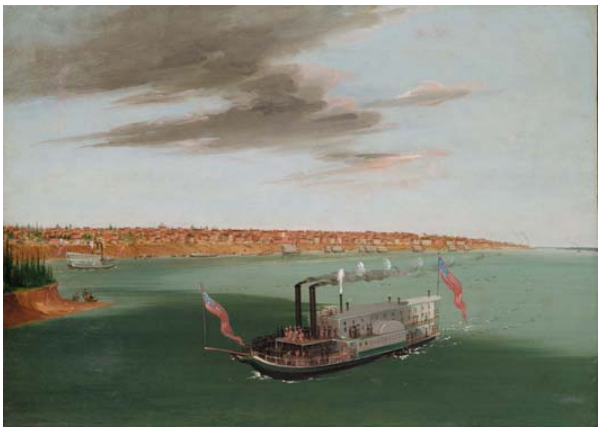
Smithsonian American Art Museum

George Catlin and the American Indians

When George Catlin (1796–1872), a young lawyer and struggling portrait painter, observed an **American Indian delegation** passing through Philadelphia in 1824, he became inspired to embark on a new career. Admiring the Indians' grace and dignity – "arrayed and equipped in all their classical beauty"– and believing that their way of life was fast disappearing, he determined that "nothing short of loss of my life shall prevent me from visiting their country and becoming their historian." He had resolved to paint as many Native Americans as possible in their unadulterated, natural state.

George Catlin, 1849, George Catlin, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Just as Catlin resolved to travel West, the United States Congress had passed the **Indian Removal Act** in 1830, which required Indians in the Southeast to resettle west of the Mississippi River. This vast forced migration – as well as smallpox epidemics and continuing incursions from trappers, miners, explorers, and settlers – created pressures on Indian cultures to adapt or perish.



Saint Louis from the River Below, 1832-1833, George Catlin

In 1832 Catlin set out to fulfill his mission. Armed with rolls of canvas, an easel, and a case of fish bladders filled with oil paints, Catlin spent the next six years journeying thousands of miles and painting hundreds of portraits and scenes of Indian life. He began his journey up the Missouri River, deep into Indian territory, to what is now the western boundary of North Dakota. Landscape scenes Catlin completed on this journey became the first comprehensive pictorial record of the country west of the Mississippi River. Catlin painted the landscapes directly, whether from the deck of a steamboat or from the high bluffs on the shore. When Catlin arrived in St. Louis, Missouri he met General **William Clark** of the **Lewis and Clark Expedition**, who had been made Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the western tribes. Clark was impressed by his portfolio of Iroquois paintings and agreed to help him visit various Native settlements in the West.

In addition to his paintings, Catlin also recorded his adventures in a series of letters and notes, which were later published as a compilation in 1842. He described native lifestyles based on the communal use of lands, undivided and without boundaries, settlement or cultivation. While he expressed hope that the government would not be a party to taking their lands from them, Catlin realized that westward migration of Euro-Americans was inevitable. Witnessing firsthand the devastation of many tribes, Catlin came to regard the frontier as a region of corruption. He portrayed the nobility of these still-sovereign peoples, but he was aware that he painted in their twilight.

Stu-mick-o-súcks, Buffalo Bull's Back Fat, Head Chief, Blood Tribe, 1832, George Catlin

Catlin's portraits and scenes of everyday life present one of the last views of American Indians living in a land unaffected by white-American influence. His intention in documenting forty-eight tribes was, in his words, "to rescue from oblivion so much of their primitive looks and customs as the industry and ardent enthusiasm of one life-time could accomplish." He was determined to document native cultures before they were irrevocably changed or eliminated. His works would be, in his words, a "production of a literal and graphic delineation of the living manners, customs, and character of an interesting race of people, who are rapidly passing away from the face of the earth . . . thus snatching from a hasty oblivion what could be saved for the benefit of posterity and perpetuating it, as a fair and just monument, to the memory of a truly lofty and noble race." Native Indian reaction to his portrait painting was mixed. Many deeply spiritual tribes were against Catlin's portrait painting, believing that his ability to capture a man's likeness so exactly might enable him to capture the spirit of the man for eternity. Many, though, acquiesced to Catlin's request for sittings and Catlin managed to produce hundreds of portraits of natives during his travels.

Catlin knew that his paintings would serve to preserve what nineteenth-century Americans called the "vanishing Indian" and the "noble savage" – phrases which were coined to encapsulate what anthropologist Renato Rosaldo calls "imperialist nostalgia," a yearning for that which one has directly or indirectly participated in destroying, a preservation of "looks and modes" in the face of the "unfortunate but necessary" destruction of a people. One of Catlin's contemporaries, politician **Lewis Cass**, clarified the idea of the "vanishing Indian" to Catlin himself, remarking that in the paintings, "I recognize many of my old acquaintances, and

everywhere I am struck with vivid representations of them and their customs, of their peculiar features, and of their costumes. Unfortunately, they are receding before the advancing tide or our population, and are probably destined, at no distant day, to disappear; but your collection will preserve them, as far as any human art can do, and will form the most perfect monument of an extinguished race that the works has seen." Cass, like many white Americans at the time, believed that the Indians were "a barbarous people, depending for subsistence upon the scanty and precarious supply furnished by the chase, cannot live in contact with a civilized community."

Comanche Feats of Horsemanship, 1834-35, George Catlin

Catlin sympathized with the plight of Native Americans, and harshly criticized government policies that had resulted in their degradation if not demise, yet he also ultimately accepted the proposition that they were "doomed and must perish." Catlin conveys an image of the indigenous peoples devoid of evidence of contact with European civilization, declaring, "it is for these uncontaminated people that I would be willing to devote the energies of my life." In 1832 he clarified his reasons for wanting to paint Native American life:

> *I have, for many years past, contemplated the noble races of red men who are now spread over these trackless forests and boundless prairies, melting away at the approach of civilization. Their rights invaded, their morals corrupted, their lands wrested from them, their customs changed, and therefore lost to the world; and they at last sunk into the earth, and the ploughshare turning the sod over in their graves, and I have flown to their rescue – not of their lives or of their race (for they are "doomed" and must perish), but to the rescue of their looks and their modes, at which the acquisitive world may hurl their poison and every besom of destruction, and trample them down and crush them to death; yet, phoenix-like, they may rise from the "stain on a painter's palette," and live again upon canvass [sic], and stand forth for centuries yet to come, the living monuments of a noble race.*

After his journeys were completed in 1837, Catlin turned showman, touring the East Coast and Europe with his collection of paintings, costumes, weapons, and Native American Indian artifacts. He called it the "Indian Gallery." Hoping that Congress would eventually purchase his collection for the nation, Catlin borrowed heavily to finance his travels and the publication of

his writings. He attempted to use patriotism to sell his work, arguing that his work was a national treasure.

As enthusiasm for Catlin's Indian Gallery waned, it became more difficult for Catlin to make ends meet and his business strategies became questionable. Consequently the Indian Gallery, a once admired ethnological wonder, devolved into a sideshow. Catlin courted audiences by presenting real Indians enacting war dances for entertainment. In effect, Catlin had created the first Wild West show, with all its compromising sensationalism and exploitation. By the 1850s Catlin's debts overwhelmed him. Joseph Harrison, a wealthy Philadelphian industrialist, paid the artist's creditors in 1852 and took possession of Catlin's collection. In his old age, the artist was invited by his friend Joseph Henry, the first secretary of the Smithsonian, to live and work in the Smithsonian Institution's Castle building. Following Catlin's death, nearly 500 paintings from the Indian Gallery were donated by Harrison's widow to the Smithsonian in 1879 and are now in the permanent collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

His hundreds of portraits of Indians, scenes of Indian life, and landscapes of the early wilderness are appreciated for both their historical and anthropological significance and their aesthetic value. Catlin was the first American artist to paint Indians in their own country and in their native costume. He was the first to paint portraits of their principal citizens and personalities. In all, Catlin painted forty-nine different Indian nations and tribes. In many cases he was the only one to portray them because soon after their encounters with Catlin, they became extinct. As westward expansion pushed them closer to the boundaries of white settlement, exposure to unfamiliar diseases like smallpox and yellow fever decimated the tribes. Today, Catlin's Indian Gallery at the Smithsonian American Art Museum is recognized as a great cultural resource, offering rare insight into native cultures and a crucial chapter in American history.

Glossary

American Indian delegation: a group of representatives from a particular Indian nation. During the nineteenth-century, it was common practice for these delegations to travel to Washington, D.C. to meet with the president and political leaders to lobby and discuss treaties. Delegates were treated as foreign dignitaries, and provided with gifts, given tours of the city, and were generally exposed to white culture.

Indian Removal Act: (1830) passed by Congress during President Andrew Jackson's administration, the law authorized the president to grant unsettled lands west of the

Mississippi River to American Indians in exchange for their ancestral homelands, which were within the existing borders of the United States.

Lewis and Clark Expedition: the first American expedition to cross the western portion of the continental United States. The journey started in May 1804 in St. Louis, Missouri and ended in September 1806 at the Pacific Ocean in present-day Oregon. Commissioned by President Thomas Jefferson, the expedition was led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, whose goal was to map the territory and find a practical route to the Pacific Ocean. The expedition is also known officially as the Corps of Discovery Expedition.

Lewis Cass: (1782-1866) American military officer, politician, and diplomat. He was the longtime governor of the Michigan territory, Secretary of War under President Andrew Jackson, and Secretary of State under President James Buchanan. Cass was a supporter of Indian removal.

William Clark: (1770-1838) American explorer and soldier. He best known as one-half of the exploring team of Lewis and Clark. Following the Louisiana Purchase, Lewis and Clark were charged by President Thomas Jefferson in 1804 to explore the newly acquired territory west of the Mississippi River. For the next two years the expedition explored and mapped the western territory, studying plant and animal life, and establishing trade with Indian tribes.