Smithsonian American Art Museum

Activity: Observation and Interpretation

Wi-jún-jon, also known as The Light, was an Assiniboine Indian who travelled to Washington, D.C. as a delegate in 1831. Delegates were appointed by their tribes to travel to the capital and appeal for favorable legislation, the protection of Native people and resources, and funding for issues specific to their communities. Artist George Catlin met The Light in St. Louis when the Native leader was on his trip back to his tribe's home territory – modern day Montana and North Dakota.

What can we learn about the conflict between Indian and white cultures from this painting? How do Catlin's background and beliefs color his approach to issues of his time? Observing details and analyzing components of the painting while placing them in historical context enables the viewer to interpret the artist's overall message.

Wi-jún-jon, Pigeon's Egg Head (The Light) Going To and Returning From Washington, 1837-1839, George Catlin

Observation: What do we see?

The serial composition – two scenes from an unfolding morality tale set side-by-side – show the 'before and after' of a pivotal event. It was an artistic technique, well-established in Europe by the time Catlin used it.

On the left side of the composition, The Light is attired in traditional Native clothing, made from materials which reflected his environment. Catlin has taken care to inventory the tasseled shirt, breach cloth, and leggings, probably made of tanned hide and adorned with beads in patterns and colors specific to his tribe. The Light also carries a large buffalo robe over his right shoulder, an item traditionally decorated with battle scenes or other important events that told stories of honor and bravery. Native artists rendered these scenes with pigments made from minerals and clays mixed with buffalo fat. The Light wears a war bonnet, or headdress, traditionally reserved for a leader to wear on special occasions. In his hand, The Light carries a

long, slender pipe bowl and stem, likely brought to Washington, D.S. as a gift for President Andrew Jackson. Delegates customarily exchanged gifts with U.S. presidents and other government representatives.

In the right panel, The Light's traditional clothing has been replaced by an American military uniform, complete with a red sash and epaulets on both shoulders. The exchange of status symbols like this military jacket was complex. The eagle feathers denoting bravery in his war bonnet are replaced with a decorative, fluffy plume on his top hat. The Light's pipe bowl and stem have been traded, it seems, for the accoutrements of a Victorian gentleman: white gloves, an umbrella, and a fan. Rather than moccasins he wears heeled boots, perhaps contributing, along with the bottle of alcohol in his pocket, to his unsteady posture.

In the left panel we faintly see the U.S. Capitol building on the horizon, while in the right panel we see tipis (also spelled "teepees") like those used by the Assiniboine people. Catlin sets the two portraits side-by-side, with one figure facing proudly forward and another turning his back to the viewer. The long, dark hair and beads adorning the sitter's ears remain. Otherwise, the figure on both sides seems quite changed.

Interpretation: What does it mean?

During the early 1800s, the United States continued to expand westward into territories already populated by American Indians. In 1830, President Andrew Jackson passed the Indian Removal Act, under which American Indians were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands: either being marched onto the lands of other tribes or onto reservations with lower economic value to the government.

While the Assiniboine were not directly affected by the Indian Removal Act, we must remember that this was the historical context in which Catlin created this painting. We are viewing an interpretation of history. We are seeing through the eyes of a white, Philadelphia-raised artist as he documents an 'exotic Indian.' Catlin, like many of his contemporaries, believed that Indian peoples would disappear in the face of inevitable progress. He traveled west and painted Plains Indians because he viewed his artworks as a way "to rescue from oblivion their primitive looks and customs."

George Catlin admired the Native people he met as the embodiment of the Enlightenment ideal of "natural man," living in harmony with nature. His artwork, then, primarily speaks to the beliefs of his time and his own, personal view of Plains Indians. Many people read the left panel as that pure Native, unencumbered by the vices and vanities of white American culture.

What is Catlin's message? We can look back at Catlin's choice of composition: the side-by-side, 'before and after' device. This is merely one part of The Light's life story as told by one artist. Catlin expanded upon it in his published memoir of his travels, *Notes and Letters*. In his book, Catlin tells a tragic story of a disastrous homecoming. The Light returned to the northern Plains from Washington, D.C. after eighteen months. His tales of the bustling capital were met with complete disbelief. His community rejected his stories as "ingenious fabrication of novelty and wonder." Catlin's own account of the Light alleges that his persistence in telling such "lies" eventually led to his murder by incredulous tribesmen. Other accounts say that a fellow Indian decided to test the belief that the Light, considered a great medicine man, could not be killed, and subsequently shot him in the head.

Catlin believed that Indians' corruption by exposure to whites would result in their eventual extinction; that their natural state had been adulterated. By looking at this painting and considering Catlin's careful notes, the viewer is presented with a cautionary tale.