

George Catlin: American Artist

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Rational for this lesson

In the summer of 2005 I walked into a room in the Renwick Gallery in Washington DC, and was overwhelmed by hundreds of portraits and landscapes of American Indians. They were literally hung from floor to ceiling. I had seen George Catlin paintings in books before but never up close and personal and in such numbers. Since that time I have been enthralled and intrigued by George Catlin and his perspective on the American Indian.

I had always been told that one had to be careful when using photographs and/or painting of Native people because they were usually taken or painted of defeated people; supplementing their existence by posing for pictures. This was not the case with Catlin since he traveled and documented the life of the Indian much earlier than most other artists and Indians were in fact happy to pose for him. In the west they were not yet a defeated people in the 1830s.

This summer (2010) I was finally able to go to the land of the Sioux - South Dakota, Nebraska, and Montana were the states I visited and were home to many Indian tribes. The vision of Catlin paintings stayed in my head. From readings for the Shifting Power on the Plains: Fort Robinson and the American West workshop I learned that Catlin not only drew what he saw but also wrote numerous books and essays on the Indian.

Later in the summer I attended a second teacher institute at the National Gallery of Art, "Crosscurrents of American Art" which focused on using American Art in the classroom. Now it all came together with for me, my new found knowledge from the Shifting Power workshop with my recollections of the art I saw at the National Gallery. I decided that my students would be given the opportunity to learn about George Catlin and see his work.

This lesson is more of a concept or a guide rather than a specific step by step lesson. I believe each teacher has a unique style and way of presenting things and therefore each lesson must be individualized. The focus of the lesson is to have students view some of his paintings and to examine some of the writings of George Catlin.

George Catlin: American Artist

Objective: to introduce students to George Catlin; both his paintings and his view of native peoples. Students should be able to understand Catlin's feeling from reading primary sources from his published work and appreciate his use of painting to capture a moment in history.

Background information: Twenty seven years after the purchase of the Louisiana Territory George Catlin set out to document what he thought to be the final days of the American Indian. At the same moment Congress passed the Indian Removal Act of 1830 forcing the Cherokee to move west of the Mississippi to Indian Territory. In a time period when most Americans saw the Native population as an obstacle to westward expansion Catlin saw them as people worthy of our respect and whose existence should be chronicled.

"I have seen him shrinking from civilized approach, which came with all its vices, like the dead of night upon him. I have seen him gaze and then retreat like the frightened deer ... seen him shrinking from the soil and haunts of his boyhood, bursting the strongest ties which bound him to the earth and its pleasures. I have seen him set fire to his wigwam and smooth over the graves of his fathers ... clap his hand in silence over his mouth, and take the last look over his fair hunting ground, and turn his face in sadness to the setting sun. All this I have seen performed in nature's silent dignity ... and I have seen as often the approach of the bustling, busy, talking, whistling, hopping, elated and exulting white man, with the first dip of the ploughshare, making sacrilegious trespass on the bones of the valiant dead I have seen the grand and irresistible march of civilization. I have seen this splendid juggernaut rolling on and beheld its sweeping desolation, and held converse with the happy thousands, living as yet beyond its influence, who have not been crushed, nor yet have dreamed of its approach." -- George Catlin

George Catlin was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania on July 26, 1796. He died 76 years later at the home of one of his daughters in New Jersey on December 23, 1872. He died virtually penniless; he spent the last months of his life living in part of the Smithsonian in Washington when Joseph Henry the first Secretary of the Smithsonian took pity on him and literally put a roof over his head.

Catlin, since childhood had been fascinated by the Native peoples of America. Although there were not many living in the area of Pennsylvania where he resided he claimed that seeing a group of them ultimately made him choose the study of them his career. The self taught artist first pursued a career as a lawyer but then followed his heart and the Native people of the Americas.

He set out in 1830, and between 1830 and 1836 he visited 50 tribes creating a collection of over 500 paintings and artifacts. This Indian Gallery was displayed in major cities in the east but his ultimate goal was to sell them to the United States Government as an anthropological study of a soon to be extinct people. The government was not interested and his collection was not generating the income he hoped for. In 1839 he took his collection across the Atlantic to the capitals of Europe. Although he met with some financial success in Europe he continued to be haunted by debt. He continued to try and sell the collect to the U.S. government with no avail.

In 1852 he was forced to give his collection to industrialist Joseph Harrison as collateral for a loan. Harrison the stored the now 607 painting in a factory, a less than ideal environment for storing painting, in did however keep the collection intact. Catlin, using the original sketches he had drawn for his painted attempted to recreate some of them.

Catlin also wrote about his experiences living among the Indians. In 1841 he published *Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians. Eight Years' Travels and Residence in Europe* was published in 1848 and in 1868 *Last Rambles amongst the Indians of the Rocky Mountains and the Andes*. The last work credited to Catlin was published in 1909 entitled *My Life among the Indians*.

After his death, the widow of Harrison who had procession of most of his early collection donated them to the Smithsonian. The United States government never did buy them but now they owned them. The 700 or so sketches he made are at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. The art and words of George Catlin survive for all Americans today.

The lesson: Prior to showing any of Catlin's paintings have student read Letter number 1.

Letter number 1

<http://www.xmission.com/~drudy/mtman/html/catlin/letter1.html>

This letter could be assigned as homework. Give students the following questions to guide their reading. These questions could be a written assignment or simply used for discussion.

1. What was his stated purpose for painting Indians?
2. What were Catlin's views of what had happed in the first 250 years of European/Indian contact?
3. What does he say about their Character?

The teacher could also find a reading from the same time period which would hold very negative views of Indians. There is a link to the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which could be used as a discussion point as to the way mainstream American viewed what should happen to the Indians of North America.

Prior to showing any of his paintings spend some time discussing what they read. Give students some background information on Catlin.

Choose some of his painting to show students. (Many of the links in the Bibliography contain painting that be used for this purpose.) These could be chosen thematically; portraits or scenes of everyday life. Show students the paintings and discuss what they see.

The purpose of this lesson is not an art lesson, but rather it will give students the opportunity to examine paintings done at a time when Indians while they were still living in their close to natural state.

Bibliography of Catlin websites

1. 104 Catlin paintings

<http://www.georgecatlin.org/>

2. New York City Public Library digital collection. - Some background information as well as many of the sketches made by Catlin.

http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/dgkeysearchresult.cfm?parent_id=236409

3. Wikipedia site – Often maligned Wikipedia is helpful for a broad overview as well as many links for both teacher and students.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Catlin

4. National Endowment for the Humanities – Edsitement lesson plans. These lesson plans are rather involved and time consuming; perhaps they should be called unit lessons. They are however a valuable source of information.

http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=265

5. Biography.com site – extremely brief bio of Catlin.

<http://www.biography.com/articles/George-Catlin-9241743>

6. Smithsonian Website contains 34 Catlin paintings, artifacts, and biographical information. This site also includes lesson plans for various grade levels.

<http://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/online/catlinclassroom/>

7. Teachinghistory.org - Contains some of the same material as above site but also some additional ideas for the classroom

<http://teachinghistory.org/history-content/featured-website-reviews/22575>

8. Library of Congress – Indian Removal Act of 1830 can be accessed through this site.

<http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/Indian.html>

9. An easier to read version of the Indian Removal Act of 1830

<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/removal.htm>

10. Digital copy of Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of North American Indians by George Catlin; published in London in 1844.

<http://www.xmission.com/~drudy/mtman/html/catlin/index.html>

