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White Medicine; Red Manhood: George Catlin's North American Indians

Abstract
'American ethnology may be said to begin with Catlin', at least so far as the Plains tribes are concerned, according to Bernard DeVoto, in his celebration of American empire in Across the Wide Missouri (1947). 1 This judgment was restated in virtually the same words - 'American ethnology begins with Catlin' - in Michael Macdonald Mooney's introduction to an 1975 edition of the artist's letters and Notes. Clearly associating Catlin with the expansionist ideology of the antebellum period, Mooney acknowledged that 'the picture books of Manifest Destiny were colored from Catlin's palettes'. 2 More recently, Brian W. Dippie, in his excellent Catlin and His Contemporaries. The Politics of Patronage (1990), stated that he was attracted to Catlin 'because of his surpassing importance to students of American culture .. his paintings and the vision behind them have become part of our understanding of a lost America. We see the Indian past through his eyes'.

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Patronage* (1990), stated that he was attracted to Catlin 'because of his
surpassing importance to students of American culture ... his paintings
and the vision behind them have become part of our understanding of
a lost America. We see the Indian past through his eyes'.3 Significantly,
in his powerful and influential critique of Euro-American attitudes to
Native Americans, *Facing West. The Metaphysics of Indian Hating and
Empire Building* (1980), Richard Drinnon claimed that Catlin
'approached Indian cultures with respect', which made him 'a very rare
white man indeed' and set him apart from contemporaries like Judge
James Hall and Colonel Thomas L.McKenney, whose works on Native
Americans blatantly revealed white prejudice and incomprehension.4

Certainly, Catlin saw himself as the champion of 'the Indian' in an
age and culture whose dominant ideology justified the exploitation of
the land and its indigenous peoples, allowing Euro-Americans to
dismiss any scruples of conscience that might have troubled them had
'Indians' been considered fully human. If his white contemporaries
were to be able to treat the Red Men fairly, Catlin believed that he had
to make them divest themselves of 'their deadly prejudices ... against
this unfortunate and most abused part of the race of their fellow men'.
He announced his programme and stated his mission in the opening
pages of his first book: *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs,
and Conditions of the North American Indians*, which he published in
1841. His aim, he said, was to 'lend a hand to a dying nation' and thus to help snatch from oblivion what could be saved as a 'fair and just monument, to the memory of a truly lofty and noble race'. His own adult life had been devoted – so he claimed – 'to the 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'.

Catlin's clearest declaration of his faith in 'the Indians' was made in 1868, in his Last Rambles Amongst the Indians of the Rocky Mountains and the Andes. In a ringing statement of his admiration for the Native Americans he had encountered, Catlin structured his tributes on a series of implied contrasts with the whites. He declared his love for 'the people who have always made me welcome to the best they had ... who are honest without laws, who have no jails and no poor-houses ... who 'love their neighbours as they love themselves ... who worship God without a Bible ... who have never fought a battle with the white man, except on their own ground'.

Last Rambles, though it contains much less information than his earlier productions, constitutes Catlin's most direct and bitterest denunciation of white exploitation of the native peoples of the New World, from Columbus' shocking ingratitude and cruelty to the indigenes of the Caribbean to Indian Removal and its consequences in the age of Jackson.

One theme of Letters and Notes was the bad faith of the white traders – and by extension of all whites – in their dealings with the Native Americans. In Catlin's narrative, the children of nature living on the Great Plains welcomed the first Euro-Americans to visit them with open-hearted friendliness and generosity, but in the years following their encounter with the Lewis and Clark expedition they learned to anticipate trickery and extortionate behaviour from all white traders. Catlin, of course, was not a trader. He could – and emphatically did – distance himself from the avarice of the fur trappers and traders, but his venture into the territory of the Mandans and other tribes on the Upper Missouri was only possible because of the commercial enterprise of the American Fur Company's leaders.

The artist reached the mouth of the Yellowstone River in 1832 on the first steamer – the Yellow Stone – to make the ascent of the Missouri and so bring supplies to the company's trading post, Fort Union. Ironically, the artist-defender of 'the Indian' travelled as guest of the commercial enterprise that would undermine native American culture, expedite the march of white empire across the American West, and – in a very short time – physically destroy the tribes of the Upper Missouri by bringing smallpox to them on its steamer.

In Letter 5 of Letters and Notes, Catlin describes the scene at Fort Union, at the mouth of the Yellowstone River, in what is now North
Dakota, when – in the summer of 1832 – he arrived and began to paint the chiefs of the various tribes assembled to trade with the American Fur Company. During his one month’s stay, Catlin used one of the bastions of the fur company’s fort as his studio while he painted Crows, Blackfeet, Assiniboin and Ojibways. His aim was to record the lives of the still-untamed ‘savages’ who had not yet come into enough contact with white civilization to be contaminated by it.

The Indian heroes selected by Catlin for the portrait gallery he was beginning to construct, and later for the book he would write, are celebrated in the text of *Letters and Notes* for their ‘manly’ qualities. They are all men who have established their reputation and preserved their honour in battle. Most wear costumes ornamented with the scalp locks of defeated enemies; a detail that Catlin emphasizes in his text. The portraits for which Catlin persuaded the chiefs to pose were, as he explains, initially regarded with suspicion and fear by the natives, since they were considered to be ‘medicine’ that robbed their subjects of some power and might even threaten their lives. These primitive responses are – unsurprisingly – treated as absurd by the white artist, who quickly overcomes the objections of the sons of nature, working on them by flattery. To convert fear and anger into pride, the painter at first offers to portray only chiefs. To be painted, therefore, becomes a mark of distinction; an honour.

Chiefs pose in their finest costumes, which can include a head-dress of bulls’ horns, buffalo robes or deer skins elaborately decorated. Not all are portrayed with weapons – the chief in the first portrait to be included in the book carries a pipe, not a tomahawk – yet Catlin calls attention to the scalp locks that fringe chief Stu-mick-o-sucks’ (Buffalo’s Back Fat’s) deerskin costume: black hair ‘taken from the heads of victims slain by his own hand in battle’ (I, p. 30). Another of the subjects, Pe-toh-pee-kiss, is not a chief; he is one of the outstanding men of the Blackfeet: ‘his dress is really superb, almost literally covered with scalp-locks’ and – Catlin points out – he openly boasts that he took eight of his scalps from the heads of trappers and traders (I, p. 34). On a later excursion, to Fort Snelling, Prairie du Chien, and Dubuque, Catlin was sufficiently impressed by one chief whom he met at Camp des Moines, variously spelled by Catlin as Kee-o-kuck and Kee-o-kuk (Running Fox) of the Sacs and Foxes, to paint him twice: once on foot and once on horseback. ‘He is a man of a great deal of pride, and makes a truly splendid appearance on his black horse’, according to Catlin (II, p. 150). These images are terrifying. In the first of them, Running Fox, tomahawk in one hand, staff of office in the other, seems threatening and ferocious. Yet the text tells us that this chief helped end the Black Hawk War in 1833 by keeping his warriors out of it; that he was famous as an orator rather than a warrior.

In effect, then, Catlin’s portraits of chiefs and leading men of the wild
tribes, sometimes at odds with his prose commentary, insist that we respond to their subjects as men of blood, or as killers – as men whose manhood is constituted by their triumph over their enemies and the number of deaths they have caused. In painting them, I suggest, Catlin has exercised his ‘medicine’ in a way he never brought to consciousness: he has ‘mastered’ the savage in himself, projecting it onto the ‘Other’ and at the same time graphically representing it as subdued by his ‘medicine’ and thus at his command.

The hero who is given the fullest biographical sketch in Catlin’s book is Mah-to-toh-pa (The Four Bears), a chief of the Mandans, with whom Catlin spent a month after leaving Fort Union. This chief appears first in the frontispiece of *Letters and Notes* [Plate I] and again, in a full-length portrait, later in the body of the work. In Letter 14 Catlin explains that The Four Bears was so distinguished a hero that he alone in the nation was allowed to wear buffalo horns as part of his head dress, as he does in the portrait that illustrates this letter.

In Letter 16 Catlin tells the story of the deed that won the Mandan chief the respect of his village and made him their leader in time of war. To avenge the death of his brother at the hands of a Riccarree warrior named Won-ga-tap, Mah-to-toh-pa waited four years, then travelled two hundred miles to the enemy village, entirely alone, entered that village in disguise, found the wigwam of his enemy, entered it, helped himself to food from Won-ga-tap’s cooking pot, smoked a pipe, and – when the time was right – drove his lance through his unwitting host’s body (I, pp. 150-1). He then took Won-ga-tap’s scalp and escaped across the prairie. ‘Readers’, comments Catlin in a parenthesis, ‘I had every word of this from his own lips, and every attitude and gesture acted out with his own limbs’ (I, p. 150).

Mah-to-toh-pa is the perfect Indian ‘knight’ in Catlin’s representation of him. From the early pages of *Letters and Notes* Catlin has dignified the tribal warriors by insisting on their ‘chivalric’ nature: on their knightly code of honour. In the story of this chief he finds the clearest and most inspiring example of chivalry. After the revenge story, we are told of the young Mah-to-toh-pa’s man-to-man combat with a Shienne (Catlin’s spelling) chief in front of opposing Mandan and Shienne war parties. The two heroes observe a ritual in which, when one has his gun and horse destroyed, the other renounces his, so that they may fight on equal terms. The bloody conclusion of the combat comes when the Mandan manages to seize his enemy’s knife while grappling with him and plunges it to his heart. After this, he holds up both the weapon and the scalp of his foe to the view of the warrior spectators (I, p. 153).

In a footnote, Catlin adds that the knife, ‘with the blood of several victims dried upon its blade’ now (1841) hangs in his Indian Gallery. He returns to Mah-to-toh-pa’s ‘celebrated knife’ later in his text. When
Plate I: Mah-to-toh-pa, Chief of the Mandans
describing scalping-knives and other Indian weapons, he adds another footnote claiming that it has become part of his own Indian Museum. This time he adds that ‘it has been several times plunged to the hearts of his enemies by the hand of Mah-to-toh-pa’ (I, p. 236). Catlin’s pride in his ownership of the knife seems almost gloating. His attitude is fetishistic. It is as if he has stolen some of Mah-to-toh-pa’s ‘manly’ medicine.

The portrait of Mah-to-toh-pa painted by Catlin while he was with the Mandans on the Upper Missouri is now in the Smithsonian. [Plate II] In it, the colour of the chief’s robe is red, perhaps part of that ‘colour of life’ that, for Charles Baudelaire, ‘flowed so abundantly ... that it was like an intoxication’ in the Catlin Indian portraits he saw in the Paris Salon of 1846. To Baudelaire, there was an element of mystery in Catlin’s use of colour: ‘Red, the colour of blood, the colour of life’. 8

If he had read Catlin’s Letters and Notes Baudelaire would have known that when Mah-to-toh-pa stood for his portrait, on the blade of the lance of polished steel that he held in his left hand ‘the blood of several human victims was seen dried ... one over the other’ (I, p. 151). Again, the effect of Catlin’s remark is to bring the bloody deeds – on which savage manhood depended – into the representation of that manhood, thus appropriating its power.

Two features of Catlin’s account of the combat of the savage heroes are particularly remarkable. One is his excited, even frenzied, rhetoric: ‘Like two soaring eagles in the open air, they made their circuits around, and the twangs of their sinewy bows were heard, and the war-whoop’ (I, p. 153). The other is that, just before his account of Mah-to-toh-pa’s heroic deeds, Catlin has described his attempt to paint the portrait of a beautiful young Mandan male who belongs to that small class of young Indian men who are not warriors but beaux or dandies. Catlin explains that his purpose was frustrated by some chiefs whose portraits he had already painted. They let the artist know that to paint a ‘worthless fellow – a man of no account in the nation’ would be an insult to the real men – the warriors – who have permitted him to take their images. The revealing aspect of the episode is the tone of Catlin’s narrative. He writes contemptuously and with disdainful humour of ‘these gay and tinselled bucks’ who ride cautiously on beautiful and soft ‘pleasure-saddles’ to watch the games in which other young men ‘are contending in manly [emphasis added] and athletic amusements’ (I, pp. 112-3). The contrast between the beaux and the warrior-hero plainly suggests that the painter shares the tribal contempt for the effeminacy of the former.

It was not for nothing, then, that when James Hall, who was himself an ‘authority’ on the Indian (as co-author with Thomas L. McKenney of a multi-volume book on the Indians) wrote a favourable review of Catlin’s Indian portraits in the November 1833 issue of his Western.
Plate II: Mah-to-toh-pa, Chief of the Mandans
Monthly Review, he stressed their ‘manly’ qualities. In this he was not merely revealing his own prejudices; he was also responding to the tone of Catlin’s work. Repeatedly, Catlin insists on the nobility, the honour of the Indian warrior who has killed his enemy, or enemies. More recently, in his George Catlin and the Old Frontier (1959), Harold McCracken devoted one chapter (Ch. 8) to ‘The Magnificent Male’, restating, in the idiom of the male chauvinist 1950s, what he took to be Catlin’s valuation of Native American manhood. In McCracken’s words, ‘There was hardly an able-bodied tribesman throughout the whole Northwest who was not an enthusiastic hunter, as well as a bold and daring warrior and a magnificent male on constant parade.

Claiming that the Crow men were known for their fine physique and were ‘virile, masculine’, McCracken added that the Crow women, ‘like all other Indian women’ were the slaves of their husbands.

Civilized life is defined by contrast to the savage in Letters and Notes. The natives, Catlin tells his readers, ‘live without incurring the expenses of life, which are absolutely necessary and unavoidable in the enlightened world’. As a result, Indians direct their faculties and their inclinations solely ‘to the enjoyment of the present day, without the sober reflections on the past or apprehensions of the future’ (I, p. 85) that, it follows, characterise civilized life.

Catlin returns to the theme repeatedly in his narrative. The Mandans, Crows and other tribes on the Upper Missouri are not ‘naked’ or ‘poor’, he explains. In a rambling and syntactically confused sentence Catlin contrasts poverty in the Christian world with lack of wealth among the savages. The Great Spirit has supplied the latter with an abundance of food to eat. Consequently, they are able to indulge ‘in the pleasures and amusements of a lifetime of idleness and ease, with no business hours to attend to, or professions to learn’. Moreover, they have ‘no notes in bank or other debts to pay – no taxes, no tithes, no rents, nor beggars to touch and tax the sympathy of their souls at every step they go’ (I, p. 210). The implication is clear: ‘civilized’ life is dominated or defined by care; by anxieties about business, about one’s profession; by financial obligations and commitments. Catlin’s Letters and Notes appeared at the time when white American men were learning to measure their worth primarily through work; when – as David Leverenz has argued – the ideology of manhood emerging with entrepreneurial capitalism made competition and the power dynamics of the workplace the only source of self-value and self-assessment. In the terms of this theory, which seems peculiarly appropriate to Catlin, manhood functioned to preserve self-control and to transform fears of vulnerability and inadequacy into a desire for dominance. In acting out the role of the artist who preserves Indian culture, in his works, Catlin can both preserve his white man’s feeling of superiority and project his own suppressed (or repressed) conception of manhood onto ‘the
savage.

Yet Catlin’s use of the Indian as a means of escaping the pressures of white male middle class life can hardly account for the exhilaration with which he represents the warriors he chooses to honour with his magic-medicine. The process might be better described as one of subjection through admiration. The splendid, noble, knightly Indian is endowed with the destructive, murderous impulses that he (the savage) cannot control. In representing this threatening power, the artist-ethnographer establishes his authority, and while distinguishing his own culture from that of the savage, is enabled to enjoy the pleasure of vicarious ‘manhood’. My contention is that Catlin projects on to the savage ‘Other’ those impulses that must be controlled or repressed in his white (‘civilized’) identity. His medicine, then, becomes that of ‘mastering’ the fierce manliness in his paintings. The artist’s domination of his savage subjects is, to Catlin, nothing less than a ‘mystery’. Early in his *Letters and Notes* he explains to his reader the significance of the word ‘medicine’ as used in his accounts of the Indians of the Upper Missouri. It derives, he says, from the French ‘medecin’ and was introduced by the Fur Traders, most of whom were French speakers. Catlin goes on: ‘The Indian country is full of doctors; and as they are all magicians, and skilled, or profess to be skilled, in many mysteries, the word ‘medecin’ has become habitually applied to every thing mysterious or unaccountable’ (I, p. 35). Catlin does not tell his readers what native American word or words were translated into French when the traders selected the term ‘medecin’; in fact he never uses the word translate. Instead, he says that each tribe has a word ‘of their own construction, synonimous [sic] with mystery or mystery-man’ (I, p. 36). Having said that, Catlin proceeds to apply the Anglicised French word to a variety of native American practices that are not explicable in terms of [white] rational discourse. 13

In his use of the term, Catlin seems to take it as self-evident that the French speakers saw a connection between native reverence or awe (their sense of mystery) and the curative powers of the dignitaries who ‘professed to be skilled’. As an example of the scope of the term, he refers to his own classification as a ‘medicine-man’, asserting that he is considered of the highest order of medicine man by ‘these superstitious people’ on account of ‘the art which I practice’ (I, pp. 35-6). The art is that of portrait painting. Catlin’s tone here is less condescending than it often is when he discusses Indian ‘superstitions’. It contrasts markedly with his contemptuous dismissal of the ‘absurdity’ of the rain-making ceremony and with his remarks on the ‘ridiculous and disgusting’ (I, p.168) aspects of the bull dance. 14 Obviously, the painter does not feel that the Indians’ awe of his art is ridiculous; rather, it is a ‘savage’ tribute to his ‘civilized’ power.

While painting the portraits of the untamed chiefs at Fort Union,
Catlin was conscious, he tells us, of the enmities smouldering among the savages he painted. They were, he said, ‘wild and jealous spirits’ who had to control their mutual hatreds while in the Fort, where they were deprived of their weapons, but would mete out death and destruction to each other once ‘free to breathe and act upon the plains’. Catlin also claimed that ‘the operations of my brush are mysteries of the highest order to these red sons of the prairie’ (I, p. 29), as if there were a connection between their pacific behaviour in front of his easel and the ‘magic’ of his art. In other words, there is a suggestion here that the artist sees himself as an Orpheus, whose power to tame the wild spirits of the Indian warriors is evidenced by the portraits they permit him to paint. Clearly, he regards his relationship to the fierce and impulsive savages as a delicate one (later, he semi-seriously considers the chance that he might be scalped before he can get back to St Louis), yet one in which his power is manifest in the portraits he paints.

When he returns to the theme of his magic (in Letter 15), Catlin gives a more dramatic version of his role as ‘medicine man’. The Indians, he says, ‘pronounced me the greatest medicine-man in the world, for they said I had made living beings’ (I, p. 107). Here the tone is not easy to establish; the evident feeling of superiority to the naivete of the savages seems to go with an acknowledgment that their reverence for his ‘magic’ was appropriate and justified.

Catlin’s verbal representation of his artist’s role among the tribes of the Upper Missouri is part of a text that is lavishly illustrated, not only with portraits of chiefs, but also with portraits of medicine men and squaws, with Upper Missouri landscapes, and – in Letters 10 to 22 – with scenes of life in the Mandan village that became the artist’s major subject for several weeks (July 20 to mid-August) after he left Fort Union and moved down river to Fort Clark. The first image offered to readers of the 1841 edition of Letters and Notes – the frontispiece – includes a full-length portrait of Mah-to-toh-pa, The Four Bears, spear in hand. [Plate I]. It also shows the artist in the act of painting the chief’s portrait, in the presence of a crowd of gawping Indians. The caption, in the 1841 edition, reads: ‘The Author painting a chief in an Indian Village’. In later editions Catlin changed this to ‘at the base of the Rocky Mountains’. In this composition the painter is dressed in a style that seems more appropriate to an East Coast studio than to the prairies. His dapper appearance suggests that the artist’s relationship to his ‘savage’ subject is one of indulgent superiority.

Catlin’s Indian portraits, together with his collection of Indian artifacts and native weapons, were exhibited in Pittsburgh and Louisville in 1833, in Albany in 1837. His ‘Indian Gallery’, as he called it, opened in the Clinton Hall, New York, 25 September 1837, and moved on to Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia and Boston in 1838.
On 25 November 1839, Catlin sailed for Liverpool with eight tons of materials and booked the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly, for 30 December 1839. Hoping to make large profits from his ‘Gallery Unique’, Catlin did all he could to attract London audiences to his ‘show’ (for it was that) in 1840. In his *Notes on Eight Years Travels and Residence in Europe* (1848) the artist explains that one of the *tableaux vivants* he devised to entertain his London audience in 1840 showed the artist in the act of painting the chief while other natives watched admiringly. In the Piccadilly ‘show’ a tipi was used as a background for the portrait of the Mandan chief Mah-to-toh-pa, though tipis belonged to a tribal culture distinct from that of the Mandans, who lived in spherical earthen structures.  

In the light of Catlin’s own remarks, the frontispiece to *North American Indians* can, then, be read as a graphic representation of the entertainment Catlin provided for his English public at his Indian Gallery in the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly. It can also, I believe, be taken as a demonstration of the artist’s ‘medicine’ or mysterious power over his savage subjects. The portraits and scenes that he has created are offered to his white readers (his book was on sale at the Gallery) as the historical record of the tribes Catlin had visited and observed. As he claims in his opening chapters, his function is that of the preserver of the Indian *past*. Since, like almost every white American of his generation, Catlin assumed that the native American was already doomed to extinction, he planned to immortalize ‘the Indian’ in his paintings. He immortalised them by subjecting them to the power of his art. They were represented as ‘Catlin’s Indians’. Their portraits represented the qualities with which the artist’s imperial gaze invested them.

In *Catlin’s Notes of Eight Years’ Travels and Residence in Europe, with His North American Indian Collection* (London, 2 vols, 1848), the author clearly presents himself as an impresario, a showman, rather than an ethnographer19. An indication of his new role is Catlin’s brief association with P. T. Barnum, when the latter subleased the Egyptian Hall to exhibit Tom Thumb against the background of Catlin’s Indian Gallery because the painter’s receipts were too low to meet the rent unaided. In his memoirs (*Catlin’s Notes*) Catlin explains that when he introduced *tableaux vivans* [sic] (I, p. 90) of as many as twenty figures to his Indian Gallery, the figures wore Indian costume but were white men and boys; the latter played the women. Among the *tableaux* were war scenes, with war whoops and war dances. Later, when a Mr Rankin arrived in Liverpool with nine Ojibways he had brought over ‘on speculation’ (I, p. 101), Catlin saw his showman’s opportunity, did a deal with Rankin, and arranged for ‘real Indians’ to do their dances against a background of the Indian Collection. In Manchester, the Ojibways entered the hall in which Catlin’s portraits of several hundred
chiefs were hung amid wigwams, costumes, weapons, and in a 'truly exciting' moment (I, p. 107) they 'set up the most frightful yells, and made the whole neighbourhood ring with their howlings'. As the Indians 'exited through the crowd with war whoops, war-clubs, bows' and leapt onto the stage, a 'roar of applause' showed that they had made 'a hit' (I, pp. 114-6). Illustration no. 7 to Catlin's Notes shows the Indians in costume, on a stage, surrounded by an audience dressed in top hats and bonnets. The 'savage' on display for the entertainment of the civilised — and obviously middle class — audience. The show culminates in the scalp dance. This 'terrifying dance' Catlin tells us 'seemed to come just up to the anxiety of the excited audience' and produced another 'roar of applause'. One old gentleman in the audience was so moved that he presented a chief with a silver tobacco box (I, p. 117). Payment seems appropriate for the thrills on offer. Ethnographer turned impresario, George Catlin sells the 'frisson' the spectators desire. They pay their entrance fee and give 'valuable trinkets and money' which the 'Indians' 'receive with thanks'.

The idea of scalping obviously gave civilized white readers and audiences the supreme thrill in the 1830s and 1840s. In his London years, Catlin learned how to exploit the fascination of all classes with this exoticism. At the suggestion of his aristocratic English friend Charles A. Murray, they attended the Caledonian Ball dressed in costumes of Sioux and Sac warriors: props taken from the Egyptian Hall exhibition. They caused a sensation by pretending, through their supposed interpreter, that the scalp locks they wore were not yet dry, having been recently been taken in war from their enemies. 'This had a delightful effect' says Catlin (I, p. 74) in that it cleared a space around the 'savages' and allowed them to breathe more freely.

By this time Catlin has lost any claim to serious attention as the pioneer of sympathetic response to the Indian. He has become a showman who exhibits his wares (Native Americans and their costumes and weapons) in a constant struggle to profit from them. From his beginnings as the recorder and preserver of Indian life there had been an element of the entrepreneur in Catlin's attitudes, as Brian W. Dippie has conclusively shown, but before 1840 that had been restrained by the avowed purpose of achieving a revision of attitude in the white spectators/audience. William H. Fisk's 1849 portrait of Catlin [Plate III] seems to express the paradoxical nature of the artist's relationship to his Native American subjects and to illustrate some of the themes of this paper. In it, Catlin is shown in a tipi, with paint brush in one hand and palette in the other, staring towards the viewer and what can only be his easel. A Native American man, unidentified in the title, looks over Catlin's right shoulder, while behind him stands a squaw, her body hidden and only her face visible, it too gazing towards Catlin's subject. The 'savages' are in subordinate positions; their dark skin
Plate III: George Catlin, 1849
contrasts with the extreme pallor of the artist’s face, though in fact Catlin was so dark-complexioned that he was considered to look like an Indian.21 The clear-cut outlines of Catlin’s features indicate his rationality and intellect, whereas the Indians’ gaze is clouded, its significance obscure. By representing the ‘manhood’ that his own culture denied him – and by constructing that manhood in terms of its fierce and bloody nature, Catlin can enjoy the forbidden pleasures of ‘the savage’ without risking his idea of himself as the white man whose gaze dominates the wild, at the time when the course of empire was taking its way so vigorously that it was obliterating Native American culture. Compositionally, Fisk’s portrait illustrates the power of the artist’s ‘medicine’ through the prominently displayed palette and the phallically positioned paint brush, tinged with red, whose diagonal links the white artist with the shadowy figures he commands.

NOTES

1. Bernard De Voto, Across the Wide Missouri (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1947), p. 392. He adds that George Catlin’s paintings and books have been immensely important to American ethnology ever since 1837. De Voto defines the West of the 1830s as more than a million square miles where there was no permanent white population and hence no federal law.


4. Richard Drinnon, Facing West. The Metaphysics of Indian Hating and Empire Building (New York: New American Library, 1980), p. 497. Drinnon also asserts that, though Catlin hoped to make a living from his work, he ‘never looked on native peoples as so many red objects to be consumed and exploited for economic personal gain’.

5. The full title of the two-volume edition, published by the author in 1841, was Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs and Conditions of the North American Indians Written During Eight Years’ Travel Amongst the Wildest Tribes of Indians in North America, in 1832, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38 and 39. In later editions, Catlin altered the title. All further references are to the 1841 edition and are included in the text. The quotation occurs on p. 3.


7. On this see Dippie, Catlin and His Contemporaries, p. 58. As Dippie states clearly, Catlin’s article recommending enforcement of a federal government ban on alcohol in Indian country in the New York Commercial Advertiser, October 1834, earned him the hostility of the American Fur Company.


11. That Catlin perceived Indian culture as antithetical to white culture has been noted by Patricia Nelson Limerick, in her *Legacy of Conquest* (New York: Dial, 1987) pp. 182-3. Limerick calls attention to Catlin's insistence that 'the Indian' (unlike the middle-class white man) lived the carefree life of the moment, with no anxious anticipations or regrets for past failures. Catlin's most scholarly and authoritative biographer -- William Truettner -- has suggested that the artist might have been motivated in his programme of travels into the wilderness by his desire to escape from the pressures and anxieties of life in the entrepreneurial white society of which he was a member by birth, education avocation and even vocation (portrait painter). Seeking to establish himself as a portrait painter at a time when the marketplace was assumed to be the American man's sphere, and entrepreneurial activity the means of proving manhood, Catlin might well have needed to escape from competition with other painters in the East (*The Natural Man Observed*, pp. 14ff). See also Dippie, *Catlin and His Contemporaries*, pp. 9-11, on the possibility that self-interest played a part in Catlin's dedication to Indian paintings.


13. In his preface to his *North American Indian Portfolio* (London, 1844) Catlin repeats his emphasis on Indian 'medicine' though he does not use the word. This time he gives the 'mysteries' more explicit significance, claiming that he spent eight years 'mingling with the Red Men, and identifying ... with them as much as possible ... in order to better familiarize myself with their superstitions and mysteries'. Here, the mysteries, or *medicine*, is clearly taken to be the key to Indian culture.

14. *North-American Indians*, I, p. 168. Catlin gives a lengthy account of the 'bull dance', or the whole ritual that supposedly ensured that the buffalo would come, in Letter 22 (Vol.1, pp. 165-9). It disgusts him because of the phallic elements that are obvious even through Catlin's prim narrative. In the 1841 edition he shields his readers' sensibilities by giving his account of parts of the ceremony in the language of the Mandans, with no translation.

15. Kathryn Hight, "'Doomed to Perish': George Catlin's Depictions of the Mandan", *Art-Journal*, 49 (1990), pp. 119-24, states that Catlin identified the chief in the 1841 caption. Though the chief could easily be identified as Mah-to-toh-pa by anyone who read -- and studied the illustrations in -- Volume 1, I can find no explicit identification in the 1841 frontispiece and its caption.


17. For penetrating commentary on the staged nature of the scene, see Kathryn Hight's article cited above. Noting discrepancies between Catlin's account of the occasion when he painted Four Bears and the scene depicted in the frontispiece, Hight argues that the 'event' shown in the latter is closer to what
occurred in Catlin’s Indian Gallery at the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly, than to any event that took place on the High Plains. See also Julie Schimmel, ‘Inventing “the Indian”’, The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920, ed., William H. Truettner (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), pp. 149-89. Schimmel draws attention to the ‘attitudinizing’ that permeated the relationship between white painters and Indian subjects. Catlin, in her view, ‘paints the Mandan chief ... as a reflection of his own self-conscious controlling image’ (p. 149); his relationship to his subjects comes straight from the drawing rooms of eastern society.

18. To be fair to Catlin, he did also make an impassioned plea for the preservation of territory as wilderness and as home for the surviving tribes (he was a pioneer in this), but his notion of national parks with resident Indians was patently a version of museum or theme park. In contrast to this gesture towards preserving ‘specimens’, Catlin’s only hope for the Indian assumed that the savage could be civilized or the Indian ‘Americanized’, yet – as his text repeatedly affirms – he found the Indian interesting only when uncontaminated by white Anglo-American culture.

19. Brian W. Dippie, who has studied Catlin’s London years more thoroughly than any other scholar, treats the artist sympathetically yet acknowledges that he was fighting a losing battle with the forces of commercialisation. His failure to get Congressional patronage of any substantial sort meant that Catlin needed to sell his works and his Indians in the marketplace. Since the publication costs of his North American Indians were so high that there was little return on his investment, he needed to attract viewers to his Gallery, yet in London his was one of a vast number of competing ‘shows’. See, in particular, pp. 99,117. Dippie refers to Richard D. Altick’s The Shows of London for an insightful account of Catlin’s predicament as an impresario.

20. The male figure resembles Mix-ke-mote-skin-na (the Iron Horn), a Blackfoot warrior, painted by Catlin at Fort Union in the summer of 1832.

21. See McCracken, George Catlin and the Old Frontier, p. 18.