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Reading American Art

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7 "Doomed to Perish": George Catlin's Depictions of the Mandan

Kathryn S. Hight

In the spring of 1830 George Catlin, a moderately successful portrait painter in Washington and Philadelphia, left his eastern practice for the frontier city of St. Louis. His objective, as he recorded later, was to paint Indians still "in a natural state."¹ In the third decade of the century little was known about life along the Missouri River, which was to be Catlin's principal destination. Pictures of native people living beyond the Mississippi could be counted on the fingers of two hands. Even the land itself was known only superficially, despite the Lewis and Clark report published a decade and a half earlier.

In five trips in six years, from 1830 to 1836, Catlin produced for easterners a marked increase in visual information on the people living on or near the Missouri River. He made enough sketches during his five trips for a painting collection of more than 450 oil portraits and scenes. These pictures, which formed the basis for his traveling Indian Gallery, have often been called definitive views of Missouri and Upper Plains life in the early nineteenth century.² Catlin has been called one of America's first ethnologists and recognized as a leading visual historian of Plains peoples.³ Despite that characterization, his work in light of the politics of nineteenth-century Indian affairs has hardly been examined. This is a significant scholarly omission given that in the spring in which Catlin made the decision to go west and in the city from which he departed, the most serious national discussion on the fate of Native Americans to date was in full sway.

Catlin's memoirs reveal that he was aware of the issues at the heart of the debate in Congress. They suggest that he was not only cognizant of the emerging national policy but that he accepted it. Some of his paintings and the way in

which he used them in his books and Indian Gallery—including those of the Mandan—can be seen today as presenting the public not so much an ethnological report as a validation of the most widely embraced theory behind the national Indian policy established that spring.

The policy, formalized as Catlin left for the West, established a federally supported program of Indian removal. On April 24, 1830, as Catlin was leaving Washington, the United States Senate passed a bill making official the removal of Indians living east of the Mississippi. By May 26, as Catlin reached St. Louis, President Andrew Jackson signed into law "an act to provide for an exchange of lands with the Indians residing in any of the States or Territories and for their removal West of the river Mississippi."⁴

The Indian Removal Bill, as it has come to be called, resulted in the forced transplantation of more than thirty thousand Native Americans. It has received nearly universal condemnation by succeeding generations of scholars and analysts. George Catlin and others sympathetic to Indian conditions supported passage of the bill, however, because of its humanitarian encasement propounding the concept of Indians as a vanishing race.⁵

Out of a nineteenth-century quasienteristic European theory that viewed man's earthly tenure as a progression grew the idea that Indians were, like ancient Britons, an early stage in the evolutionary history of man. It was argued by numerous scholars and poets that Indians, like their European counterparts two millennia before, would disappear, wither in the presence of the more advanced stage now represented by contemporary Europeans. In the early years of the nineteenth century the idea was nurtured by many nationalistic writers who wanted to find native candidates to serve as material for a distinctive American epic myth.⁶ By 1830 Indians in poetry and in other written sources were heralded as America's equivalent to ancient Britons.

In politics as in poetry the vanishing-people myth also appeared. Andrew Jackson was a forceful proponent of such an idea. In December 1829, just a few months before Catlin left for the West, Jackson stated: "Surrounded by whites with their arts of civilization, which by destroying the resources of the savage doom him to weakness and decay, the fate of the Mohegan, the Narragansett, and the Delaware is fast overtaking the Choctaw, the Cherokee and the Creek. That this fate surely awaits them if they remain within the limits of the States does not admit of a doubt. Humanity and national honor demand that every effort should be made to avert so great a calamity."⁷ By the spring of 1830 a majority of the members of Congress could, in the name of humanity and national honor, vote to stave off calamity for the Indians through the concept of removal. The idea that Indians exposed to European civilization were destined to decay became a common refrain. It was noted in a variety of sources, publications, and

speeches that Indians were unable to cope with the encroaching "progressive" civilization. Among the reasons given was their moral and physical inferiority: they were viewed as childlike because they were unable to resist white man's temptations, especially alcohol. Because they succumbed readily to European diseases, they were dubbed physically weaker; their societies, it was noted repeatedly in the press, were unable to withstand the musketed superiority of white invasions.

By 1828 Thomas McKenney, first head of the Office of Indian Affairs and one of the Indians' most sympathetic supporters in Washington, had acquiesced to the vanishing-Indian theory. He, along with a growing number of seemingly well-intentioned individuals, saw removal as the only way to prevent their immediate extinction. In an address in December 1829 to the Indian Board for Emigration, Preservation and Improvement of the Aborigines of America, McKenney summed up the growing opinion among people sympathetic to Indians: "We once . . . thought it practicable to preserve and elevate the character of our Indians, even in their present anomalous relations to the States but it was distance that lent this enchantment to the view. We have since seen for ourselves, and that which before looked like a flying cloud, we found on a near inspection to be an impassable mountain. . . . If the Indians do not emigrate, and fly the causes which are fixed in themselves, and which have proved so destructive in the past, they must perish."⁸ Within five months this position enabled the bill to pass.

Jackson's and McKenney's words were echoed in Catlin's memoirs. Catlin reveals that he left for the West assuming that Indians were doomed, that removal was the only humanitarian course to follow, and that even that course was only a temporary measure to slow their inevitable extinction. Catlin's objective in painting Indians, therefore, as he wrote in the opening of his treatise, was "to fly to their rescue, not of their lives or 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 the canvass, and stand forth centuries yet to come, the living monuments of a noble race."⁹

No group painted by Catlin fulfilled his prophetic words better than did the Mandan. While he was staying at Fort Union in the late summer of 1832, Catlin painted inhabitants of the Mandan villages along the Missouri River in what is today North Dakota. He lived among them for several weeks, sketching both portraits and scenes, including a number of the O-Kee-Pa ceremony, a sacred ritual known to have been witnessed by only two white men, Catlin and the agent at Fort Union, at the time. Five years later, in 1837, just as Catlin was be-

ginning to tour with his Indian Gallery, the Mandan villages that he had painted were nearly completely wiped out as smallpox raged up the Missouri River.¹⁰

The Mandan had thus fulfilled Jackson's, McKenney's, and Catlin's prophecy that Indians exposed to white civilization would succumb. Their fate, however, appears to have been received as a special omen for the painter. Catlin's father noted in 1838 that while George mourned "the dreadful destiny of the Indian tribes by the smallpox," he nevertheless would find that "that shocking calamity will greatly increase the value of his enterprise and his works."¹¹ The objective of painting untouched Indians in their "wild and unsophisticated state in order to erect a monument to a dying race and a monument to myself" was realized sooner than expected.¹² As Catlin's father callously—though perhaps realistically—noted, the pictures of the Mandan fulfilled both expectations.

Catlin set the stage of the Indian Gallery presentation of his Mandan pictures by reminding his audience that the Mandan were a "strange, yet kind and hospitable people whose fate, like that of all their race is sealed; whose doom is fixed to live just long enough to be imperfectly known and then fall before the fell disease or sword of civilizing devastation."¹³ Catlin then noted that all was not lost; he pointed out that the Mandan now rose from decimation, phoenix-like, through the magic of paint.

In his Indian show, which toured America and Europe from 1837 to 1845, in his illustrated memoirs of his frontier adventures, and in the brochures for the show itself, Catlin featured the vanished Mandan. His decision to do so did not lack purpose. His show and books were intended, as the playbill for a Boston appearance in August 1838 indicated, to "entertain and instruct" city people attracted to scenes and tales of the "Far West" (fig. 7.1). To lure a paying audience to the displays, Catlin promised views of exotic aspects of life in the West: dances, villages, the strange O-Kee-Pa ceremony. From the list in the playbill, it can be gathered that Catlin felt that a potential audience could be persuaded to see entertaining images of people who were colorful and dramatic but who no longer threatened white civilization. His show would be a vicarious adventure—"Twelve Buffalo Hunting Scenes" were announced in bold letters—among "the wildest Tribes of Indians, in America."

Catlin clearly assumed that his audience would not be averse to assurances that the Indians—Mandan and others—were a disappearing race. In the Boston playbill, for example, the only identifiable Indian individuals mentioned were nationally famous men recently defeated and captured by superior white forces: Black Hawk and nine of his principal warriors—"painted at Jefferson Barracks, while prisoners of war"—and Osceola, Mick-E-No-Pah, Cloud, Coa-Ha-Jo, and King Philip—all captured or defeated chiefs of the Seminoles. None of these individuals had much to do with the "Far West" supposedly central to the Indian

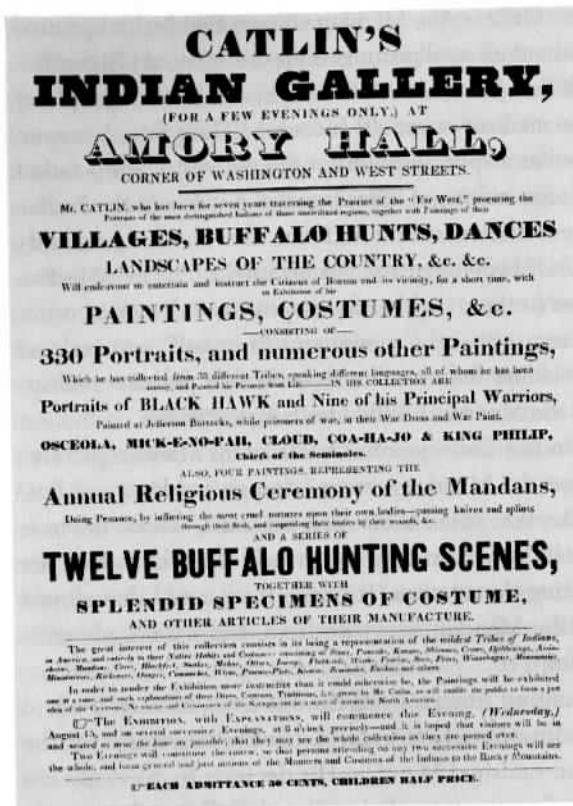


Figure 7.1 George Catlin, *Catlin's Indian Gallery*, 1838. Playbill. Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.



Figure 7.2 George Catlin, *Osceola*, 1841. Engraving. Catlin, *Letters and Notes . . .* (London, 1841), no. 298. Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, Calif.

Gallery displays, but they were useful in reminding the Boston audience that the Indian "threat" was, along with the Indian people themselves, a "vanishing" worry.

Neither Catlin's portrait of Black Hawk, painted at Jefferson Barracks, St. Joseph, Missouri, in 1833, nor his portrait of Osceola (fig. 7.2), painted at Fort Moultrie Prison in South Carolina, fitted his general objective of recording the western Indian in his native habitat.¹⁴ Both men were from east of the Mississippi and neither, imprisoned as they both were at the time the portraits were taken, represents the free and bold natural man Catlin claimed to be documenting. Both, however, had become national celebrities for their respective roles in confrontation between whites and Indians. They were the best-known Indians in the United States at the time Catlin was developing his gallery. Both leaders, having lost their wars with United States military forces, could now be featured as praiseworthy adversaries, men of honor and bravery, gallant losers in the inexorable march of the new American society to its destiny of conquest of the

continent. As mythic protagonists in the American drama of conquest, their images were welcomed in Catlin's gallery.¹⁵

The portrait of Osceola is particularly instructive in looking at the role of Catlin's Indian paintings and his Indian Gallery in the national Indian policy of the era. At the time the portrait was painted, Osceola was in dismal circumstances, but no hint of his hardship appears in the finished work. It is the portrait of a thirty-four-year-old man in robust health showing no sign of sickness or the helplessness of a man defeated in war and tricked into captivity. Catlin presented a heroic portrait of an epic figure in elaborate costume and classical stance. Osceola even holds a long gun—hardly plausible under the circumstances of his imprisonment. The fact that he was doomed would have been known by all gallery visitors at the time of the painting's first display.

Catlin had been offered the opportunity to paint the portrait of the great Seminole chief shortly after his capture and imprisonment in the winter of 1837–38. For that purpose the artist left his touring Indian Gallery briefly in

January 1838 to journey to Fort Moultrie. Neither the resulting portrait, perhaps Catlin's finest work, nor the way that it was exhibited suggests the sinister, even bizarre circumstances surrounding its procurement. At the time of the sketching, Osceola was not only in prison but, according to all sources (including Catlin's family chronicler, Marjorie Roehm),¹⁶ a very sick man. After incarceration in St. Augustine, Florida, Osceola was taken from his home territory to South Carolina. For reasons never substantiated, he was accompanied by Dr. Frederick Weedon, his "friend" and physician. Dr. Weedon also became Catlin's friend during the sitting sessions, and after Osceola's death it was he who supplied the material about the last hours of Osceola's life that Catlin included in his Indian Gallery lectures and in his book. Dr. Weedon was also—as many historians of the event fail to note—the brother-in-law of Gen. Wiley Thompson, whose murder by Osceola was credited with starting the Seminole War. Compounding the strangeness of the relationship between Weedon and Osceola is the fact that, according to Weedon's great-granddaughter, the doctor secretly beheaded the chief immediately after his death and took the head with him on his return to St. Augustine, where it remained in his study for several years.¹⁷

Nothing about these circumstances is revealed in the portrait. Nor is there any suggestion that the man posing for Catlin would die only a few days after the work was finished. Catlin had come to the "rescue" not of a living man but of a "living monument of a noble race." Like the vanished Mandan, the vanished Osceola as a highlighted image in the Indian Gallery suggests further that the show was a touring reinforcement for the "vanishing race" theory. For a profit at the door, Catlin had discovered that a disappearing people could with impunity be transformed into entertainment.

This transformation can be seen especially well in several works involving the Mandan. The image Catlin chose as the frontispiece and introduction to his illustrated memoirs is a scene depicting himself painting the Mandan chief Mah-To-Toh-Pa (fig. 7.3). In the work the artist stands at an easel adding the finishing touches to his portrait of the chief,¹⁸ who poses before a group of tipis. A group of male Indians stand and sprawl about, watching the painter work. Catlin, wearing a fringed coat, tailored pants, hunting cap, and perhaps moccasins, holds a palette in his left hand and with his right brushes the center of the nearly completed portrait.

The scene is not what it appears to be. Although Catlin implied that it was a record of an actual event, and described the painting of the chief in his memoirs, a comparison of the written description and the frontispiece reveals many discrepancies. In Catlin's memoirs, Mah-To-Toh-Pa is described as dressed in a costume that included a belt with a tomahawk and a scalping knife and as wearing



Figure 7.3 George Catlin, *The Author Painting a Chief at the Base of the Rocky Mountains*, 1841. Engraving. Catlin, *Letters and Notes . . .* (London, 1841), frontispiece. Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, Calif.

about his neck a bear-claw necklace. None of these appears in the painting. In addition, Catlin wrote that he painted the portrait indoors, not outside, and that women and children, not men, surrounded the chief.¹⁹ What Catlin actually painted was a collage drawn in part from an actual event, in part from a staged happening, and in part from the artist's imagination. Its message was to generalize Mah-To-Toh-Pa and to suggest not so subtly that the fate of the vanished Mandan would soon be the fate of all Indians (and in fact in many editions of the book the title of the frontispiece was the more general title shown here).

Catlin suggested this dénouement in several ways. By deleting the power symbols of the chief, he was featuring Mah-To-Toh-Pa as a romantic legend rather than as a threatening warrior. The painting shows the chief and his warriors as doomed, mythic Indians living, as Catlin described them in his memoirs, a primitive and childlike existence, "with minds . . . unexpanded and uninfluenced by the thousand passions and ambitions of civilized life."²⁰ An even more generic view of Indians emerges in the backdrop of the picture, which is entirely ersatz and emblematic. The tipis and woodlands of the background are symbols for Indians in general but have little to do with the Mandan, who lived along the Missouri River banks. Furthermore, they did not use conical bison-hide lodges; their homes were spherical earth structures (fig. 7.4). Catlin knew that and described them correctly in his *Letters and Notes on Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians*: "Their present villages are beautifully located . . . in the midst of an extensive valley on an extensive plain (which is covered with a green turf, as well as the hills and dales, as far as the eye can possibly range, without a tree or bush to be seen) . . . rising from the ground, and towards the heavens, domes (not 'of gold' but) of dirt—and the thousand spears (not spires) and scalp poles &c., &c., of the semi-subterraneous village of the hospitable and gentlemanly Mandans."²¹

Like ancient Greeks or medieval knights, with whom Catlin's memoirs frequently associated Indians, the Mandan thus became characters in a national mythic drama. The frontispiece was in fact drawn from a dramatic event that occurred on the second night of Catlin's Indian Gallery show in London in 1841. In a series of tableaux vivants, the second tableau, according to Catlin's memoir, showed "Mr. Catlin at his easel, in the Mandan Village (painting the portrait of Mah-To-Toh-Pa, a celebrated Mandan Chief). The costumes of the chief and the painter are the same that are worn on the occasion."²² Behind the players a large Crow lodge, part of the gallery exhibit, would have been visible and hence an association would have been made between the tipi and Indian performers. Romantic evocations that developed from the stage vignette were more appealing for the frontispiece than was factual information from a distant frontier. The staged event as the source of the picture explains, too, Catlin's natty garb, which

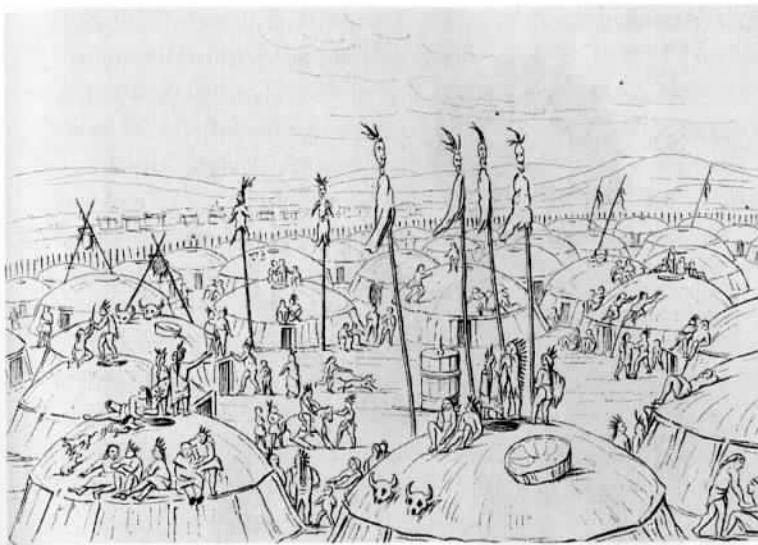


Figure 7.4 George Catlin, *Mandan Village*, 1841. Engraving. Catlin, *Letters and Notes . . .* (London, 1841), no. 47. Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, Calif.

seems far removed from the frontier. In quality and workmanship, the painter's buckskin garment appears to be more the work of London tailors than of a seamstress in St. Louis. The cap in particular is more reminiscent of those worn by hunters in the paintings of George Stubbs than of one worn by a frontiersman just ending weeks of rough travel in a primitive skiff on the Missouri River. The clean and well-cut clothing worn by the impresario was clothing that well-to-do patrons of the gallery or book could imagine themselves wearing as they enjoyed a vicarious frontier excursion.

Catlin had gotten the idea for his living pictures while he himself was dressed as a Sac warrior at a London society ball.²³ He subsequently enlisted his nephew Burr to dress as a Plains chief and stalk his gallery, frightening English ladies to the delight of all. A London newspaper, the *Morning Post*, reported on Burr's success: "During our visit on Saturday the company were startled by a yell, and shortly afterwards by the appearance of a stately chief of the Crow Indians stalking silently through the room, armed to the teeth and painted to the temples, wrapped up in a buffalo robe on which all his battles were depicted, and wearing a tasteful coronet of war—eagle quills. This personification was volunteered by the nephew of Mr. Catlin, who has seen the red man in his native wilds, and presents the most proud and picturesque similitude that can be conceived of a savage warrior."²⁴



Figure 7.5 Mr. Catlin's Lecture on the Red Indians in His Indian Gallery, c. 1842–43. Playbill for the London exhibition. Gilcrease Institute of American Art and History, Tulsa, Okla.

So successful was the theatrical appearance of Burr that Catlin painted him in an eclectic costume of Mandan and other western chief's paraphernalia and used that work in the early 1840s as the cover for the brochure announcing Catlin's Indian Gallery (fig. 7.5). All the iconographical symbols for a western fantasy are in view: the eagle's-quill war bonnet, the painted buffalo robe, a "grizzly" bear-claw necklace, bows and arrows, a fringed tunic, leggings, and

moccasins. The symbols of war and power not included in the earlier scene of Catlin himself painting the Mandan chief could apparently be included here because it was all fantasy. Burr was only an actor in costume, not a living challenge to white society. Like the patrons who supported both the Indian Gallery and Catlin's books, Burr is dressed up for an evening's adventure—an alternative fantasy to a knight of the Round Table or a Roman or Greek warrior. The costume was put together from objects collected by Catlin along the Missouri but was worn as theatrical attire, out of context and released from the meaning that the objects held for their original owners.

Catlin's use of material and actors for an artful fictive construct of life in the "Far West" was perhaps different only in degree from much "western" scientific ethnology of the last century. He spoke no Indian language, spent only brief periods with any group, and did not document his collected items in any scientific way. Nonetheless, Catlin's images were as widely seen as any pictures of Indians in the nineteenth century. Few in the United States or Europe had any better information than that received from him. Not uncharacteristically as the ethnologist he claimed to be, Catlin produced what has been called "serious fiction." He took from the Mandan and the far-western territory images and artifacts and wove them nearly seamlessly with his own and his nation's sociopolitical beliefs and needs. Since the status of "participant observer" gave his interpretations credibility, his views and reports were embraced as reality.²⁵ Thus, as the reservation system developed in nineteenth-century America, the graphic images in words and paint of a race doomed to perish except as entertainment—false though the concept was—served to abet the disastrous isolation of native people.

Notes

This essay originally appeared in the *Art Journal* 49, no. 2 (Summer 1990).

1. George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians: Written during Eight Years of Travel amongst the Wildest Tribes of Indians of North America in 1832, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39* (London, 1841), 1:2–9.

2. John Ewers, "George Catlin, Painter of Indians and the West," in *Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution*, 1955 (Washington, D.C., 1956).

3. See Robert Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian: Images from Columbus to the Present* (New York, 1978); Ewers, "George Catlin"; William H. Goetzmann, *Exploration and Empire: The Explorer and the Scientist in the Winning of the American West* (New York, 1966); and William H. Truettner, *The Natural Man Observed: A Study of Catlin's Indian Gallery* (Washington, D.C., 1979).

4. *Register of Debates in Congress*, 21st Congress, 1st Session (Washington, D.C., 1830), 382.

5. Brian E. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Middletown, Conn., 1982), 61–65. This work provides a thorough discussion of the idea of the vanishing race as applied to American policy toward Indians in the United States in the nineteenth century.

6. William H. Cracroft, "The American West of Washington Irving: The Search for a National Tradition" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1969), 12.

7. "Andrew Jackson," in James D. Richardson, *A Compilation of Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789–1902*, 10 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1903), 2:457–58.

8. Thomas L. McKenney, "Address" (1829), in *Memoirs: Official and Personal* (New York, 1846), 240–41.

9. Catlin, *Letters and Notes*, 1:16.

10. *Ibid.*, 1:87–123.

11. Putnam Catlin to Francis Catlin, March 18, 1838, in Marjorie Catlin Roehm, *The Letters of George Catlin and His Family: A Chronicle of the American West* (Berkeley, Calif., 1966), 27.

12. Catlin, *Letters and Notes*, 1:16.

13. *Ibid.*, 1:103.

14. Figs. 7.2, 7.3, and 7.4 are reproduced from Catlin's *Letters and Notes*. For this work Catlin had most of his Gallery paintings translated into engravings. An oil portrait of Osceola, dated 1838, is owned by the American Museum of Natural History, New York.

15. For a full discussion of these images, see Kathryn S. Hight, "The Frontier Indian in White Art, 1830–1876: The Development of a Myth" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1987), 95–102.

16. Roehm, *Letters*, 126–28.

17. Mary McNeer War, "Disappearance of the Head of Osceola," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 33 (January–April 1955): 213–15.

18. In the first edition of *Letters and Notes*, the title of the frontispiece was *Painting of the Mandan Chief...*; in later editions *The Author Painting a Chief at the Base of the Rocky Mountains* was used. The Rocky Mountains were hundreds of miles from the Mandan site.

19. Catlin, *Letters and Notes*, 1:102–13.

20. *Ibid.*, 1:105.

21. *Ibid.*, 1:80–81.

22. George Catlin, *Catlin's Notes of Eight Years' Travel and Residence in Europe, with His North American Indian Collection* (New York, 1848), 1:69–71.

23. *Ibid.*, 70.

24. Catlin, p. 211.

25. See James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, 1988), 10. Clifford raises important questions about the gathering and explanation of cultural artifacts and beliefs. In the nineteenth century and too often even today, he suggests, the cultural biases of the ethnologist observer and the biases of the receivers and givers of that information are insufficiently examined. Clifford's discussion of the role, now under scholarly review, of the "participant observer" is replete with examples from many cultures.