

George Catlin (1796-1872)

“...nothing short of the loss of my life shall prevent me from visiting their [the Indians]’ country, and becoming their historian...”

George Catlin was born July 26, 1796 in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. His interest in Native Americans may have begun at an early age with tales of his mother’s capture (and safe return) when she was seven by Iroquois Indians and his family’s friendly contact with an Oneida family. Many details about him remain a mystery, but he was determined to paint and document as many American Indians as possible, afraid westward expansion would destroy them and their ways of life. Catlin started his professional life as a lawyer, studying in Litchfield, Connecticut, being admitted to the Bar in 1818 and working with his brother Charles. George began trying his hand at being a miniature painter and portraitist soon after. In 1820 he moved to Philadelphia, living and working as an artist becoming close friends with portraitist Thomas Sully’s future son-in-law, John Neagle. Catlin began exhibiting artwork at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts being elected an academician in 1824. In 1826 Catlin moved to New York and became a member of the National Academy of Design. During this time he painted his first Indian portrait, the Seneca Chief, Red Jacket.

George married Clara Bartlett Gregory in Albany, New York in 1828, with George continuing to work as a portraitist on the East Coast. Wanting to travel west George went to St. Louis in 1830 to meet with Gen. William Clark, commissioner of the new Missouri Territory, hoping to travel with Clark and other military expeditions. In 1832 George began what was to become his most famous era of travel, first traveling up the Missouri River to Fort Union. During this trip Catlin painted a number of Indian tribes, including Sioux, Blackfeet, Cheyenne, and Mandan. George exhibited his growing collection in Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Louisville, and New Orleans. Catlin continued to travel including with an 1834 expedition led by General Leavenworth and Colonel Dodge to Fort Gibson, near Pawnee and Comanche territories in today’s southern Oklahoma. George and Clara traveled up the Mississippi River to Fort Snelling where he was able to paint Sioux, Chippewa, Sauk, and Fox. Catlin opened his *Indian Gallery* in New York City in 1837 with shows in D.C., Baltimore, Boston, and Philadelphia. During this time George tried unsuccessfully many times to have the U.S. Government buy his collection.

With declining interest in his exhibit and the failure to have his collection bought by Congress, George set off for England in 1839. The *Indian Gallery* opened at the Egyptian Hall in London in 1840. With great personal expense, George self-published Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians in 1841. Catlin exhibited his collection in England and elsewhere in Europe, eventually storing the paintings and traveling with performers while he told of his encounters in the American West with artifacts and props. In 1843, he hired nine Ojibwa Indians to travel with the show throughout the U.K. He then hired and toured with 14 Iowa Indians. In 1845, Catlin moved his family and the Iowa to Paris. He toured with the Iowa in Europe while also enjoying the patronage of the French King, Louis-Phillippe. During this period Catlin also painted a series of works depicting the LaSalle Expedition. Unfortunately, the French monarchy fell and George fled to England with his children. Having incurred massive debts throughout his life and now in England, he was forced to put his *Indian Gallery* up for auction. Railroad tycoon Joseph Harrison agreed to buy the collection in its entirety in exchange for paying off most of Catlin’s debt. Catlin spent much of the rest of his life trying to replicate his *Gallery* from notes, sketches, and memory making up his *Cartoon Collection*, which was exhibited at the Smithsonian (1872) after returning to America in 1870, having spent 31 years abroad. Catlin died in New Jersey surrounded by remaining family December 23, 1872.