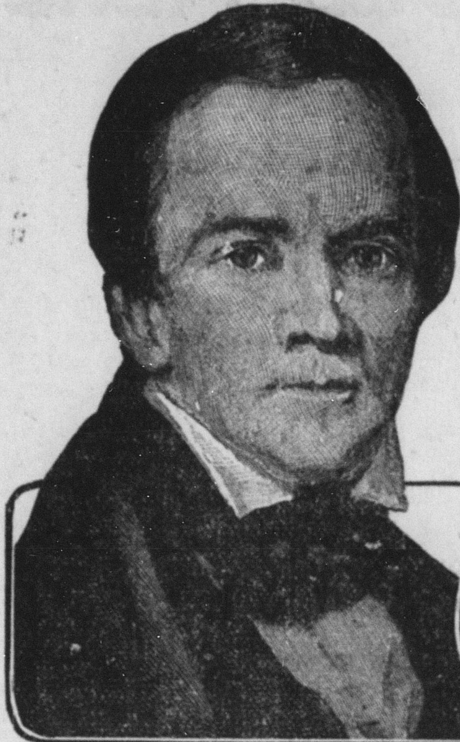
Some Early Painters of the American Indian

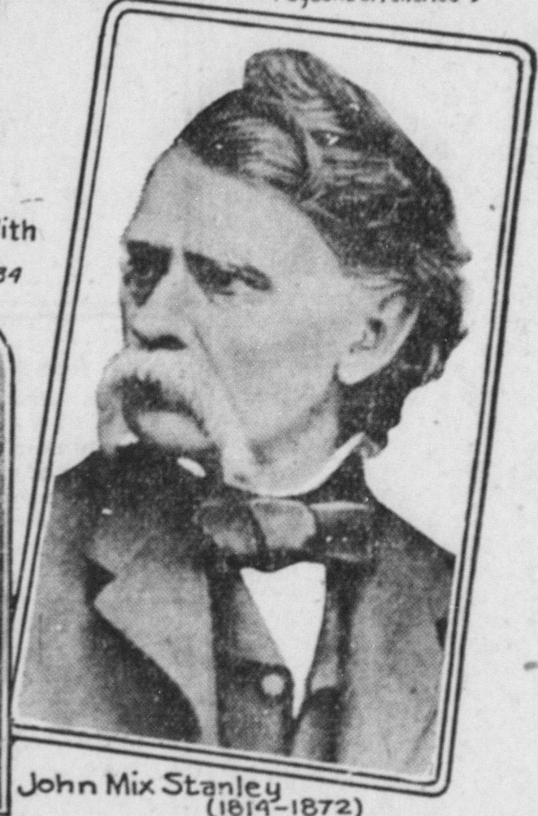


Portrait of George Catlin

Indians of the Northern Plains by Carl Bodmer (From Yale University Press "Pageant of America")

George Catlin, the Famous Explorer, Feasting With Chief Mah-to-toh-pa of the Mandan Tribe. From Catlin's own sketch made about 1834

"A Crow Hunting Camp" by William de la M. Cary



John Mix Stanley (1814-1872)

"An Osage Scalp Dance" by John Mix Stanley—1845

By ELMO SCOTT WATSON

RECENT exhibitions of native art—drawings, paintings and other examples of handicraft—in various parts of the country have not only served to revive the interest of the people of the United States in the original inhabitants of this continent, the North American Indians, but they have also served to recall the services of a group of men whose work deserves a better fate than the partial oblivion which has been theirs. These are the early painters of the Indians to whom we are indebted for most of our pictorial evidence about the red man while he was still comparatively untouched by the so-called "civilizing" influences of the white man.

Foremost among the names of these artists is that of George Catlin and mention of him is singularly appropriate at this time because it was just 100 years ago that Catlin had started on his work of recording the appearance, social life and customs of the tribes of the trans-Mississippi West. Catlin was born in Wyoming, Pa., in 1796 and in accordance with his father's wishes studied for the profession of law, which he began practicing in Philadelphia. But, being fond of excitement and adventure, he found it difficult to stick to his business and he devoted almost as much time to his avocation of drawing and painting, in which he was self-taught, as he did to his vocation of law.

One day in 1830 a party of Indians from the "Far West" who were on their way to a council with the Great White Father in Washington stopped over in Philadelphia. Catlin saw them on the streets and was so delighted with their fine forms and noble bearing that he determined to give up his law practice and devote his life to making a collection of paintings of Indians which would show, after they were gone, how they looked and how they lived.

The result was his first journey to the Indian country in 1832 and for the next eight years he devoted himself to the work. He traveled many thousands of miles by canoe and on horseback among tribes which were still as wild and untamed as they had been in pre-Columbian days and he found plenty of excitement, difficulty and danger in his work. He made paintings everywhere, portraits of chiefs and warriors, paintings of the scenery of the West, of herds of buffalo, of hunting life, of Indian games, ceremonies, social customs—everything that would illustrate the life and country of the wild tribes of the West. More than that, he painted scenes of old trading posts and United States forts, upon whose sites now stand important American cities, so that even if he had not left an invaluable record of the Indian, the historical value of this other phase of his work would be great enough to place Americans under a heavy debt of gratitude to him.

Catlin not only painted hundreds of pictures but he made a big collection of Indian objects—dress, weapons, scalps, objects used in games, articles of clothing, ornaments, etc. With all of these he made a tour of the East, exhibiting his collections in the larger cities and everywhere attracting large crowds.

It seems unfortunate that Catlin could not have profited more from his work while he lived. For in his old age he lost the fortune which he had built up, became a bankrupt, in fact, until all he had left was his gallery of some 500 or more of his Indian paintings. These he would not sell but gave them to the Smithsonian institution for safekeeping as an imperishable record of his life work and of a vanishing race. Some of them were destroyed or injured in a fire which swept the institution in January, 1865, but the remainder which are still preserved in the Smithsonian are valued at not less than $1,000,000, which, if anything, is an undervaluation, considering their importance. Catlin died in 1872 at the age of seventy-six.

The same fate overtook most of the paintings of another famous artist, John Mix Stanley. For the same fire in the Smithsonian destroyed all but five of Stanley's collection of more than 150 paintings which represented 10 years of work among 43 different tribes on the southwestern prairies, in New Mexico, California and Oregon.

Stanley was born in Canadaigua, N. Y., in 1814 and died in Detroit the same year that saw the death of Catlin—1872. At the age of fourteen he became an orphan and was apprenticed to a wagon maker in Naples, N. Y., where he spent his boyhood. In 1834 he moved to Detroit and the next year his latent genius began to show itself in a series of portraits and landscapes. In 1838-39 he made his home in Chicago and Galena, the famous lead mining center in Illinois, and at this time he first became interested in Indians, making trips to Fort Snelling, Minn., to paint them. From 1839 to 1842 he made his home again in the East and continued with his painting.

His first important work among the Indians was done in 1842 when he visited the Indian country in Arkansas and New Mexico and made many pictures of Indians and Indian scenes. The next year he was in what is now Oklahoma, painting among the Cherokees, the Creeks, and the Delawares as well as some of the tribes in Texas. The year 1845 found him again in New Mexico and by this time he had painted 83 canvases which he exhibited in Cincinnati and Louisville.

In May, 1846, Stanley returned to the West and painted the famous Sac chief, Keokuk, the wife of Black Hawk and other notables of that tribe. In October of that year he visited Santa Fe to paint some more pictures but instead he joined the famous march of General Kearney and his dragoons from Santa Fe to San Diego, taking part in several engagements which marked the phase of the Mexican war that was fought in California.

Going north the next year Stanley found some more excitement awaiting him, for he narrowly escaped being in the Whitman massacre when that famous missionary, his wife and 11 others were killed by malcontents of the Cayuse tribe. He had another narrow escape from death a short time later when he returned to San Francisco to take a certain ship for the return to New York via Cape Horn. He barely missed the ship before it sailed and it was lost at sea and never heard of again. Next Stanley went to Hawaii where he painted the portraits of the famous King Kamahameha III and his queen, which now hang in the government museum, formerly the royal palace, in Honolulu.

Returning to this country in 1850 Stanley exhibited his pictures in various eastern cities and in 1853 he was appointed artist to the expedition sent by the government to explore a route for a Pacific railroad from St. Paul to Puget sound. Before starting on this expedition he deposited his collection of Indian paintings in the Smithsonian institution. Various attempts were made to have congress purchase the collection for the nation but nothing came of them. The pictures remained the property of the artist, so when all of them except five were destroyed in the January, 1865, fire in the Smithsonian, Stanley suffered a great personal loss.

A list of early painters of the Indians would not be complete without including in it the name of Carl Bodmer, a Swiss artist who accompanied Prince Maximilian of Wied-Neuwied, when that distinguished German scientist made his journey up the Missouri in 1832-34. Bodmer not only "left posterity a priceless heritage of Indian portraits and pictures" but he also, like Catlin, made drawings of forts, fur trading posts, battle scenes, etc., which are invaluable historical records. In the picture by Bodmer which is reproduced above are shown three typical warriors of the plains (from left to right) a Missouri, an Oto and a Ponca.

Until a few years ago there was living in New York city another early painter of the Indian whose work takes rank with that of the artists previously mentioned. He was William De La Montagne Cary, a New Yorker who in 1861 with two companions made his way up the Missouri river from St. Louis and during the next 13 years put down on canvas scenes from the fast-vanishing frontier which are among the most valuable records of life in those days which we have.

Others who might be listed, even if lack of space prevents discussion of their contributions, are: Capt. Seth Eastman, a teacher of drawing at the United States Military academy at West Point, who saw service in the Indian country and was chosen to illustrate "Historical and Statistical Information Respecting the History, Condition and Future Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States," issued by the government in 1850; Carl Wimar, a German artist who lived among the Indians for six months in 1857 and some of whose paintings are preserved in his adopted city, St. Louis; F. O. C. Darley, the leading illustrator of books and magazine articles three quarters of a century ago; and George DeForest Brush, who is still living and whose "studies of the Indian have helped to establish the redskin in an important place in the art history of America."

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"RIPE OLD AGE" IN WORK AND HOBBIES

Grim Reaper Defers Call on Busy Man.

Old men have been rescued from brooding over aches and pains by many sorts of beneficent hobbies. Gladstone kept himself refreshed and prolonged his capacities far into the eighties by beguiling himself with translating Plato, Horace, and Alfieri. Arthur Balfour, at eighty, wrote works of philosophy in the intervals of his transactions of the affairs of state. Gladstone also had a happy hobby in the chopping down of trees in his woods. If he had not indulged in the indiscretion of a horseback ride in a rainstorm, Washington might well have prolonged his years with his happy hobby of tree planting. Louis XVI of France was on the way to a placid old age with his unusual hobby of being a practical locksmith when the guillotine cut him off. The historian Bancroft prolonged his comfortable eighties with his hobby of horseback riding. Out of door avocations are particularly to be recommended, with prudence and moderation, to octogenarians. We do not need to go back to past history for examples of the benefit of a hobby, for we are acquainted with old men who derive a saving interest in life from their passion for collecting things.

But perhaps the commonest saving hobby with venerable Americans is the habit of keeping at work. There is after all no hobby like making an avocation of one's vocation. To like one's work, and to keep on doing it, is the true secret of a "ripe old age." One lives on and on because one keeps cheerfully living one's chosen life. Habitual occupations, when enjoyed, are not only a panacea, but very frequently an antidote, for the pains of age. To quit one's work prematurely is an invitation to the reaper. When Mark Twain said that he was suffering from "the worst of diseases, old age," he confessed his loss of the zest for work. The ripe old age is still the busy one.—Exchange.

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