

1-SR28-60

ASSIGNMENT:

George Catlin and His Indian Gallery

The very use of the word savage, as it is applied in its general sense; I am inclined to believe is an abuse of the word, and the people to whom it is applied. –George Catlin

George Catlin (1796-1872) journeyed west five times in the 1830s to paint the Plains Indians and their way of life. Convinced that westward expansion spelled certain disaster for native peoples, he viewed his Indian Gallery as a way "to rescue from oblivion their primitive looks and customs." Catlin was the first artist to record the Plains Indians in their own territories. He admired them as the embodiment of the Enlightenment ideal of "natural man," living in harmony with nature. But the more than 500 paintings in the Indian Gallery also reveal the fateful encounter of two different cultures in a frontier region undergoing dramatic transformation.

After reading [George Catlin's Obsession \(Links to an external site.\)](#) and view Catlin's paintings in the [Campfire Stories with George Catlin \(Links to an external site.\)](#), answer these questions:

- What was George Catlin's *Obsession*?
- What can be learned by viewing Catlin's paintings?
- Did you have any favorite paintings in the collection? Which ones?
- Were there certain paintings that appeared biased for/against any one group or individual? Which ones?
- What can the student history learn about the West by studying Carlin's works?

ESSAY:

George Catlin had an obsession with Native American culture. It was an obsession that ignited in him with a terrifying yet life-changing experience he had when he was 9-years-old with an Oneida Indian. It was with this one single experience that he pretty much devoted his life to preserve “the looks and customs of the vanishing races of native man in America.” I think in viewing Catlin’s work one may get a different perspective on or about the Native Americans that were here before us all those years ago. George Catlin’s Obsession states “Catlin was the first to picture them so extensively in their own territories and one of the few to portray them as fellow human beings rather than savages.” I truly believe that it was through his initial interaction that kind of made him realize that the natives or, “savages” as they called them, were actually quite nice.

My favorite painting tat Catlin painted would have to be the one depicting a elder Indian sitting, with what seems like paintings of bulls on his body, holding a bow and some arrows and covered in what I can only guess as a bison hide or some animal hide. This one really resonates with me because in it I can see the kind of juxtaposition of what a “normal” person would view a Native as, savage, hunter,

killer, but I can also see what Catlin must see too, I see someone who is very wise In the way that he looks on. I also see someone who is calm and protective, I see him holding the bow with an arrow at the ready as to say that he's looking out for his people and is ready to fight when needed. I find the beautiful body paintings and the intricate jewelry quite fascinating as well because it makes me wonder if the Native American shown is of higher status, or maybe he is some hero back from war.

I do think that someone who is looking at Catlin's work might think that he is a little biased to showing the Natives as a more peaceful group of people. I do think that if a big group of the first settlers found the natives to be "savages" there must be some truth to that. In looking at his works there really are none that show any sort of savage characteristics. They all show them acting as one in community or working together to get something done. So I think that might lead to someone thinking he is biased.

Overall, I think that a student who has better visual learning rather than reading something and trying to understand it could benefit from his works. I do think that, as stated above, his works show Natives in a much less harsh light, kind of "contrary to popular belief." It would be something that after viewing a student could then look to some works that show the Natives in a more savage light like a lot of people normally think, and in using and keeping in mind both the student can come up with their own views on how the early Native Americans were when it came to the development of the new world.