

The Red Man's Bones: George Catlin, Artist and Showman by Benita Eisler in "pasatiempo," the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, November 15, 2013

George Catlin, deemed the "First Artist of the West," described his life as a "tissue of risks and chances." He was an artist and explorer, an ethnologist and writer. His achievements were staggering. France's King Louis-Philippe warmly received Catlin at the Tuileries. In *The Red Man's Bones: George Catlin, Artist and Showman*, Benita Eisler has composed a finely hewn and thoroughly researched portrait of a man who produced more than 600 paintings of Western landscapes and Indians. Through the years, however, Catlin's art, writing, and ethnological collection have been little known.

From 1831 to 1837 Catlin lived with the Native Americans he painted, enjoying their ceremonies and dining on buffalo meat. He worked demonically and one summer completed 186 portraits. He was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, in 1796. As a product of the "raw Pennsylvania frontier," being embedded in a tribal milieu would not have been a quantum leap. Within his family Catlin was called "the Hunter." At the age of 8 in Windsor, New York, he was discovering Indian arrowheads, beads, and even skulls. Twenty-five years later, after a short-lived law career and a stint producing miniatures, Catlin painted his first portrait of an Indian, the aging Seneca chief Red Jacket.

Vicissitude streaked Catlin's life. He was personable, handsome, and eloquent. He had a "quicksilver turn of mind" but no political savvy and could be gulled. Despite his precarious finances, he never abandoned his pursuit of art or adventure. An inveterate self-starter and promoter, he acquired letters of introduction to powerful and influential figures, whom he approached to fund his painting and collecting ventures. He pitched one desperate appeal to the Marquis de Lafayette, asking the French nobleman to act as his agent in France. These efforts led to patronage from such luminaries as New York governor DeWitt Clinton and in Saint Louis, William Clark, then the Missouri Territory's commissioner and "the most powerful American west of the Mississippi."

Under Clark's aegis, Catlin traveled in 1830 from St. Louis up the Mississippi to Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, where he saw masses of Plains Indians. His initial painting foray into Indian country was to Cantonment Leavenworth in Kansas, where he painted 28 portraits of members of Central Plains and Woodland tribes. In 1832 the hands-down "historic journey of [Catlin's] career" commenced on March 26, when he departed from St. Louis to travel 2,000 miles to Fort Union, where the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers meet. While living with the Mandan tribe, he produced four of his most famous (and controversial) paintings. At the tribe's request, he completed "the only surviving pictorial narrative of O-kee-pa," the Mandan ceremony of renewal and coming of age. Accompanying a dragoon regiment on assignment to Fort Gibson in Arkansas Territory a year later, he painted the Native Americans there. Catlin also collected Indian artifacts. Together with his art they made up his Indian Gallery, which he tried repeatedly to sell to Congress. Its final rejection in 1839 propelled him into exile in England, Belgium, and France for the next 31 years.

Catlin toured, exhibiting his Indian Gallery, and published his *Letter and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians* in England in 1841. His paintings were admired by Charles Dickens and praised by poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire and novelist George Sand in France. When his exhibits' popularity waned, Catlin began to incorporate live performances and traveled with two troupes of Indians. He developed a Wild West Show 30 years before Buffalo Bill.

Andrew Jackson's 1830 Indian Removal Bill, which reflected the lack of sympathy for Indians in Congress, and the 1848 Revolution in France affected Catlin's fortunes as much as his restlessness, political naiveté, and feeble grasp of finances. The deposing of King Louis-Philippe squelched Catlin's commission for a series of paintings depicting the North American journeys of French explorer René-Robert Cavalier, Sieur de La Salle. Catlin briefly landed in a debtor's prison in London and, deaf and infirm in his later years, resided in a down-at-the-heels hotel in Brussels.

For the first seven years of his marriage to Clarissa Bartlett Gregory, she was parked with her family or his while he traveled. In 1845 she died in Paris at the age of 37. Their son George Jr. died two years later. Catlin was separated from his three daughters for 20 years, reuniting with them before his death in Jersey City, New Jersey, in 1872. His chief concern then was "What will become of my collection?" The collection now resides at the Smithsonian Institution.

Eisler illuminates Catlin's personal associations, years in exile, and paradoxical nature. This is a solid, welcome account of his life and times — in which the specter of Native Americans' deracination visits every page.