

## 6-B Catlin Painting the Portrait of Mah-to-toh-pa-Mandan, 1861/1869

George Catlin (1796–1872)



6-B George Catlin (1796–1872), *Catlin Painting the Portrait of Mah-to-toh-pa — Mandan, 1861/1869*. Oil on card mounted on paperboard, 18 ½ x 24 in. (47 x 62.3 cm.). Paul Mellon Collection. Image © 2006 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

### The Art

George Catlin's painting of the Indian chief was done in the 1860s. It shows that Catlin had a good relationship with the Mandan tribe. The portrait is of a very important Indian chief. We know this because he is wearing decorated buffalo skin robes and horns on his headdress. He also is holding a spear. The chief's name was Mah-to-toh-pa and he was the only man allowed to wear the horns. In this painting, many adults and children of the Mandan tribe, living in what is now North Dakota, have gathered to admire the chief and watch as the artist paints their chief's portrait.

### The Artist

George Catlin was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, in 1796. Catlin taught himself to be a portrait painter and set up his own business in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Catlin traveled west in 1832 to the area that is now North Dakota. He wanted to paint pictures showing how the Indians lived so Americans would not forget. This is one of about 500 paintings that Catlin called his Indian Gallery. His paintings can now be seen at the Smithsonian and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

### The Historical Perspective

Our country was very different at the time this picture was painted. Much of it had not been settled by the United States government. American Indians lived off the land in the unsettled parts of the country.



## Conversations and Teaching Activities

Head Start Children ages 3 to 5

Encourage children to look closely at the artwork. Introduce new vocabulary and use books that relate to the painting.

### Describing



- ✓ Ask children to describe the setting for this painting. It is on a level grassy area beside a river. Trees are in the background. There is blue sky.
- ✓ Do you see the easel in the picture? Do we have easels in the classroom?
- ✓ Do you see water? Do you think the people in the picture swim in the water?
- ✓ What kind of animals are in the picture? Ask children to locate two dogs (in the front and center); an artist and easel (center); five horses (background); and a chief (center).
- ✓ How many feathers does the chief have? (There are too many to count.) How many feathers do the other Indians have? (They have one, two, and three.) Why do you think the chief has many more feathers?
- ✓ Ask the children to describe what chief Mah-to-toh-pa is wearing (a headdress, many feathers, etc.).

### Analyzing and Interpreting



Ask the following questions to stimulate thinking and discussion:

- Why do you think so many people are there watching? (They have never seen a picture being painted. This is an important event.)
- What are the expressions on their faces? (The people look interested, worried, afraid.) Why do you think they look like that?
- Have you ever painted someone's picture? How did you do it?
- Why do you think the people are outside? (There are no electric lights; the people live there.)
- What is a headdress? How is the chief's headwear different from a king's? (Children might say a headdress is a lot like a crown that a king would wear. Instead of a crown of gold and jewels, a headdress has beautiful bird feathers.)
- Are there other things you would like to tell me about this painting?



## Connecting and Extending

### Introducing Vocabulary

background	gathered	posing
chief	headdress	proud
crowd	horseback	
curious	portrait	



## Connecting and Extending continued...

### Related Family Literacy Experiences

Parents and children can:

- ✓ take turns painting each other's portrait.
- ✓ take a walk and find an object to paint on paper.
- ✓ look through photographs to find different types of portraits (poses, backgrounds, etc.).



### Books

***Mother Earth*** by Nancy Luenn (Athenum, 1992)

Explore with the artist the bounty that illustrates the earth's rich resources provided for all of us to enjoy and preserve.

***Mouse Paint*** by Ellen Walsh (Harcourt, 1989)

Three white mice get into jars of paint and learn what happens when they mix colors and try out the results. A surprise ending awaits.

***Northern Lullaby*** by Nancy White Carlstrom (Philomel Books, 1992)

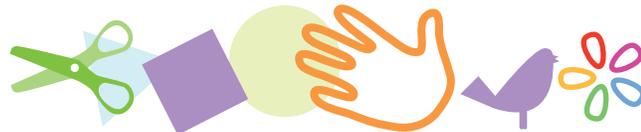
This beautifully illustrated American Indian tale glorifies nature, including mountains, newly fallen snow, the northern lights, and arctic animals, weaving a song of slumber any young child will enjoy.

***Polar Bear Son: An Inuit Tale*** by Lydia Dabovich (Clarion Books, 1997)

A grandmother adopts an abandoned cub and helps him grow into a healthy adult. He returns her love by sharing his catch of fish with her.

***Raven: A Trickster Tale from the Pacific Northwest*** by Gerald McDermott (Harcourt Brace, 1993)

Travel with the raven through a traditional American Indian story as it tries to bring the gift of light to the cold, wintry days and nights.



### Related Educational Experiences

- ✓ Compare and contrast a portrait and a photograph. Have children take turns painting each other's portraits.
- ✓ Look at other portraits of Indian chiefs and compare their headdresses.
- ✓ Read stories about the lives of Indians.
- ✓ Count and categorize animals, feathers, and other objects reflected in this poster.
- ✓ Discuss ideas about the painting, different types of paint, and techniques

used to create different effects.

- ✓ Talk with children about portraits and paintings. Explore the many examples of portraiture in the *Picturing America* collection of art.

The ideas listed are just a few of the many activities that could be used to introduce or extend children's learning. Your knowledge of your children and families supports your ability to ensure positive learning experiences and outcomes for students. As an educator, you probably have ideas for books, songs, finger plays, and activities that you have thought of when introducing or extending children's learning related to the "A Head Start on *Picturing America*" artworks. We encourage you to confer with your colleagues, visit the local library or bookstore, and share your ideas with others.