

Catlin Painting the Portrait of Mah-to-toh-pa—Mandan, 1861/1869

“There is occasionally a chief or warrior of such extraordinary renown, that he is allowed to wear horns on his head-dress.... The reader will see this custom exemplified in the portrait of Mah-to-toh-pa.... [He is] the only man in the nation who was allowed to wear the horns.”

So wrote George Catlin in *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians*, begun during the artist’s two-thousand mile journey along the upper Missouri River to what is now North Dakota. It was the first of three self-financed trips between 1832 and 1836 that Catlin undertook in order to capture what he rightly believed to be the final and most thorough visual record of the indigenous cultures of the frontier. Just two years earlier, the Indian Resettlement Act, designed to send Eastern Woodlands tribes inland in order to “save” them from the steady encroachment of white civilization, had passed Congress.

George Catlin agreed with the resettlement policy. In his practical (yet sentimental) values, he was representative of the Jacksonian era, in which the United States, finally in control of the wilderness, felt a wave of nostalgia for what it was about to lose. Born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, Catlin was a mostly self-trained, but successful, portrait painter with a business in Philadelphia. In 1828, according to the artist, an encounter with a delegation of Winnebago on their way to Washington changed the course of his career.

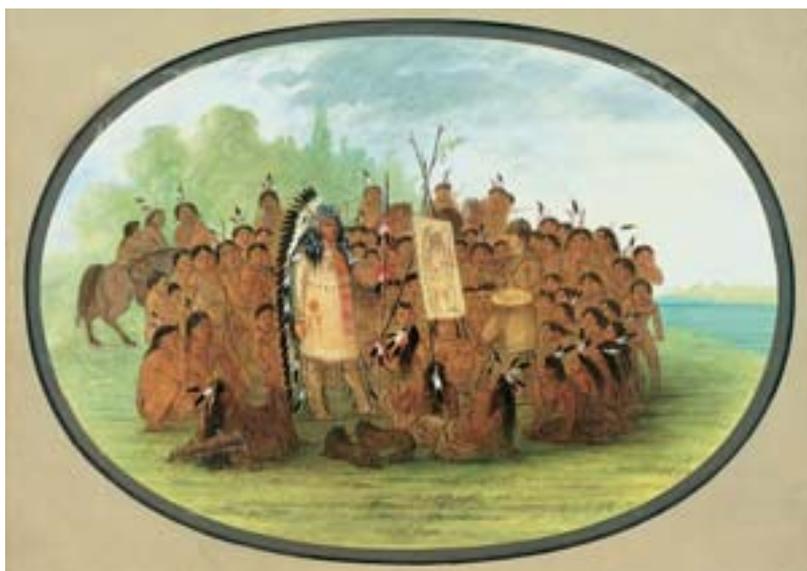
Catlin painted a full-length portrait of Mah-to-toh-pa, second chief of the Mandan people, in late summer of 1832. The Mandan, a stationary agricultural and hunting tribe living in

domed timber-and-earth lodges, occupied two villages above the Missouri River near present-day Bismarck. Catlin and Mah-to-toh-pa developed a close relationship: the painter was one of only two white men to observe the Mandan sacred rite, the O-kee-pa, before the tribe’s extinction from smallpox in 1837.

In his *Notes*, the artist writes that Mah-to-toh-pa spent all morning dressing for his likeness. When he arrived in Catlin’s dwelling, surrounded by admiring women and children, he brought a buffalo-skin robe that he had painted with the history of his battles. And he was wearing the headdress mentioned above. In addition to the war-club seen here, Mah-to-toh-pa carried bow and arrows, a lance, a shield, tomahawk, and a scalping knife, and wore a magnificent bear-claw necklace. Catlin’s method was to work quickly, “chalking out” the outlines of the figure on canvas, building up the head and bust in warm tones, and then often blocking in the rest of the work, including the body and details of the costumes, to be finished later. On careful inspection we can see that the artist does not represent the chief’s costume as he described it. Missing are the robe, the necklace, and all the instruments of war. Catlin admits in his *Notes* that he altered the chief’s dress to enhance the “grace and simplicity of the figure,” although some historians believe the artist took away the weapons because he did not want Mah-to-toh-pa to appear overly threatening to a white audience.

In 1838, Catlin organized his five hundred or so paintings and artifacts into a touring show that he called his Indian Gallery. When the government showed no interest in buying it, he moved the gallery to London. Unfortunately, Catlin lost his life’s work plus many priceless artifacts to creditors; his works were acquired as a gift to the Smithsonian and the National Gallery of Art only after his death.

This image of Catlin painting the chief is one the artist reproduced from memory later in his life; it derives from a print that served as the frontispiece to his *Notes*, published in 1841, when he was living in England. Catlin’s *Notes* tell us that the painting is incorrect in many details: the location is not indoors, and the individuals surrounding the chief include braves. Even Catlin’s attire is a little too neat for the wilderness. Surrounded by onlookers, he seems to be showing off a bit, and indeed, when we look carefully, it becomes apparent that Catlin’s role as artist is really the subject of this work. The glowing canvas on its makeshift easel occupies the center of the painting, and our eyes travel between Mah-to-toh-pa and his likeness. The open-mouthed audience, who according to Catlin were aghast at his skill in capturing what many Indians believed to be a part of the sitter’s spirit, is eloquent testimony to the artist’s ambition and stunning accomplishment.



6-B George Catlin (1796–1872), *Catlin Painting the Portrait of Mah-to-toh-pa—Mandan*, 1861/1869. Oil on card mounted on paperboard, 18½ x 24 in. (47 x 62.3 cm.). Paul Mellon Collection. Image © 2006 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Have students look carefully at this painting, noticing its different elements.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE **E | M**

Ask students to locate these elements.

Two dogs: *They are located in the front and center.*

Artist and easel: *They are found in the center.*

Quiver: *It is in the left front.*

Five horses: *They are found in the background.*

E

Have students describe the setting for this painting.

It's on a level grassy area beside a river. Trees are in the background.

E | M | S

Ask students to describe the chief's dress.

He wears a long feathered headdress, ornaments in his hair, a decorated shirt or tunic, leggings, and moccasins.

Ask students to describe Catlin's easel.

It's made of three tree branches tied together like a teepee.

Ask students how Catlin emphasized Mah-to-toh-pa in this painting.

He is a light figure in front of a much darker crowd of onlookers, larger than the other figures, and near the center of the painting.

He and Catlin are the only ones standing.

What else did Catlin emphasize?

The portrait on the easel almost glows.

M | S

Have students explain the main subject of this scene. Is it Catlin painting or a Mandan chief?

It depicts Catlin creating art and is not just a portrait of the Mandan chief.

INTERPRET **E | M | S**

Why do you think all these people are so interested in watching Catlin paint a portrait?

They were familiar with American Indian paintings and may have been curious to see how the white man made his images.

Also, to many, creating realistic likenesses of people may have seemed like capturing their spirit on paper or canvas.

E | M | S

Ask students why historians value Catlin's paintings.

Catlin shows details of American Indians' dress and life before they adopted European clothes and customs.

M | S

Tell students that when Catlin first painted Mah-to-toh-pa's portrait, they were indoors, but Catlin changed the setting when he painted this version. Ask students why they think Catlin might have done this.

One answer is that perhaps he thought an outdoor setting would be grander, would better reflect the Mandans' home on the plains, and would allow him to include more people in the scene.

M | S

Explain to students that Catlin did not include in this painting all the weapons that the chief was wearing when he posed for it. He said he left these out because he wanted to emphasize the grace and simplicity of this figure. Ask students if they think it is or is not all right for an artist to change details in a painting such as this. How would our impression of Ma-to-toh-pa change if he were wearing all his weapons?

CONNECTIONS **Historical Connections:** Lewis and Clark expedition; Louisiana Purchase; Manifest Destiny; Westward Expansion; Jacksonian Era; American Indian tribes and histories; Trail of Tears; Indian Removal Act

Historical Figures: Thomas Jefferson; Andrew Jackson; Meriwether Lewis; William Clark; Sacajawea

Geography: lands of American Indian tribes; Missouri River

Literary Connections and Primary Documents: *The Story of Sacajawea: Guide to Lewis and Clark*, Della Rowland (elementary); *I Will Fight No More Forever*, Chief Joseph (elementary); *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians*, George Catlin (middle, secondary)