

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

First Artist of the West: George Catlin Paintings and Watercolors from the Collection of Gilcrease Museum. By Joan Carpenter.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/02r9s7ff>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 19(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

McLerran, Jennifer

Publication Date

1995-06-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

sale promotes both economic and cultural survival. The final paper is by Weinstein, Linda Passas, and Anabela Marques on the use of feathers in native New England. The authors attack popular stereotypes by discussing the variety of uses of feathers and their symbolism through the ages.

The book also contains an appendix of resources, listing the addresses of native groups and museums where materials can be found. All in all, this is a worthy start to a new series and should be worthwhile reading for those interested in Native Americans in general and the natives of New England in particular.

Charles A. Bishop

State University of New York at Oswego

First Artist of the West: George Catlin Paintings and Watercolors from the Collection of Gilcrease Museum. By Joan Carpenter Troccoli. Foreword by Serena Rattazzi. Tulsa: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994. 176 pages. \$29.95 paper.

A number of nineteenth-century European and American artists who made Native Americans their subject produced work in a style intended to convey ethnographic accuracy. George Catlin was among such artists who attempted to depict everyday Indian life in a truthful manner devoid of artifice. Catlin is best known for his *Indian Gallery*, a collection of six hundred portraits, genre scenes of daily life, and landscapes executed between 1826 and 1848. Resulting from the artist's travels throughout the western U.S. and characterized by a high degree of ethnographic detail, though not always great artistic quality, the works in this collection toured major cities in the U.S. from 1837 to 1839 and Europe in 1840.

First Artist of the West documents an exhibit of works by Catlin that are owned by the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa. The exhibition was held at the Gilcrease in 1993 and 1994 and then toured nationally under the auspices of the American Federation of Arts. Most of Catlin's paintings in the Gilcrease's collection are copies or versions of the original paintings in the *Indian Gallery* (which is now in the possession of the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution), and the majority of the Gilcrease collection consists of small watercolors and a few oil paintings. All of the watercolors are portraits, and most of the oils are either land-

scapes, hunting/sporting scenes, or scenes of everyday activities. They are arranged in the catalog differently from the way they were customarily organized by Catlin, who usually grouped his paintings according to type (portraits, landscapes, sporting scenes) and tribe. Here they are effectively assembled to form a visual narrative that follows the course of Catlin's travels in North and South America.

Joan Carpenter Troccoli, director of the Gilcrease Museum, organized the exhibition and wrote the exhibit catalog text. Troccoli is obviously engaged with, and extremely well-informed on, her topic. She has thoroughly assimilated and presented in a highly accessible form a wealth of information, building on the work of the foremost scholars on Catlin, such as William Truettner and Brian Dippie. She draws heavily on Catlin's *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians*, which was written in 1841 to accompany the *Indian Gallery*. Troccoli helps us to appreciate Catlin's paintings as the products of historically situated cultural understandings. Troccoli reveals how the particular flavor of the artist's writings results from the combination of his pretensions to scientific accuracy and his aspirations to literary greatness. As Troccoli aptly explains, Catlin wished his writings to contribute to anthropological research, but he equally wished to convey to his readers the excitement of an expedition or an adventure story.

Catlin staked his professional success on the presumption that the demise of Native American cultures was imminent. He was committed to the belief that native cultures were quickly vanishing in the face of unstoppable and divinely ordained westward movement and Euro-American settlement. This belief, combined with a truly mercantile spirit, compelled Catlin to document the everyday life, religious customs, and manner of dress of those Native American cultures still reasonably intact. Catlin had a commodity to sell, and the success of his business venture depended on the scarcity of his product. If he could convince his audience that his paintings of America's native cultures were not simply the first but also the last and the only truly authentic representations of Native American customs and peoples, he could, he thought, succeed.

Catlin hoped to produce artworks of great ethnographic accuracy. At the same time, he wished to produce works of high artistic quality. Unfortunately, these two goals often conflicted. It takes a high level of technical skill to produce artworks that are both

ethnographically accurate and, at the same time, of superior artistic quality. Consequently, by the fine art standards of his time, Catlin's works—especially those produced early in his career—were often considered of inferior value. One of the characteristics of Catlin's work that led to this negative evaluation is its often sketchy, unfinished quality. When viewing Catlin's watercolors, one is struck with the impression that the artist felt the need to work at breakneck speed lest his subjects, as members of a "vanishing race," disappear before he had the chance to capture them. As a result of Catlin's zeal, the quality of his work often seems compromised. However, those who view this "primitive" quality as appropriate to its subject matter see it as one of Catlin's greatest strengths. What they find most valuable, and what interests them most in Catlin's work, concerns what he can tell us about his subjects; and the sometimes primitive, sketchy quality of his portrayals seems only to add to the apparent honesty of his representation. We never have the sense that Catlin is attempting to fool the viewer through some highly skilled artistic sleight-of-hand. Instead, his works seem honest and direct, lacking in artifice. Often referring to his watercolors as "sketches," Catlin wished to position his works as participants in nineteenth-century pseudoscientific anthropological discourse. As Troccoli successfully conveys, the sketch, as the equivalent of the explorer's hastily scribbled field notes, was appropriate to the conditions established by Catlin and his contemporaries as necessary to the production of authenticity.

Troccoli is less successful in her repeated attempts to legitimate Catlin's work in art historical terms by proclaiming him "First Artist of the West." Such attempts to establish Catlin as first to accomplish various artistic and cultural feats seems an attempt to provide Catlin a position of prominence in the Western art historical canon. This desire seems further evident in Troccoli's attempts to position Catlin as an important influence on subsequent American painters by establishing him as a link between the Hudson River School painters of the mid-1820s, who made the eastern wilderness their subject, and prominent western landscape painters of the 1860s and 1870s such as Frederic Edwin Church, Thomas Moran, and Albert Bierstadt. However, as Troccoli's own text reveals, it really matters little whether Catlin is afforded a place of recognition within the art historical canon. Instead, Catlin's work is most engaging when viewed as both a product and a producer of nineteenth-century American cultural values and concerns.

Among Catlin's many "firsts," as described by Troccoli, are first artist to devote his whole career to production of works that took the American West as their subject; first artist to make the Plains tribes and such attributes as stoicism, bravery, and physical prowess synonymous with all American Indians; first painter to represent the western landscape's vast openness, bright colors, and unfamiliar shapes; and first to make a consistent attempt to represent Native Americans as unique individuals. While all of these assertions are debatable, the last is most tenuous. As Troccoli herself notes, there is a dearth of representations of Indian women in Catlin's work, and the depictions of them that do exist tend to be more stereotypical than those of men. It is problematic to present Catlin as an astute perceiver of the unique individuality of his subjects when he displays such an attitude toward at least half of those individuals who made up the communities he depicted.

The last of Catlin's works reproduced in *First Artist of the West* is *Shooting Flamingoes, Grand Saline, Argentina* (1857), one of a series of twelve paintings produced during the artist's travels in South America. In ending her text with another of Catlin's firsts, as seen in this late series of works, Troccoli presents an area of Catlin scholarship that has received little attention. This series showing the use of Colt revolvers, commissioned by Samuel Colt in 1857 for use in an advertising campaign, is believed to have been the first commissioning of fine art for use in product promotions.

Troccoli's text is far superior to what is probably the most widely available source on Catlin, *The George Catlin Book of American Indians*, by Royal B. Hassrick, primarily because it draws on more recent information and is informed by more recent art historical methodologies. Compared to Brian Dippie's study, *Catlin and His Contemporaries: The Politics of Patronage*, Troccoli's study may seem somewhat thin; however, it is not intended for the same readership as Dippie's book. Troccoli's work is intended to be accessible to a wide audience, the museum-going public, whereas Dippie's book is intended more for the serious scholar of nineteenth-century American art and history. Compared to William Truettner's work, *The Natural Man Observed: A Study of Catlin's Indian Gallery*, Troccoli's work is more accessible in terms of both cost and content. Truettner's work is comprehensive and authoritative, but it is presented in a less easily assimilable and less affordable format. Troccoli's text is presented in small chunks

of information, much like museum wall text, which allows for ease of assimilation. Text broken up into short segments to accompany the reproductions allows the reader to come and go as he or she pleases, digesting small bits of information at each sitting. It simulates the experience of going through an exhibition and reading wall text while viewing the works.

First Artist of the West was produced in a very affordable paperback edition. It is especially reasonably priced, considering the fact that it contains so many high-quality color plates. Informed by Troccoli's text, the viewer of the works collected here will be afforded insight into one of the most fascinating—and telling—figures of nineteenth-century American history and those native peoples who were his subjects.

Jennifer McLerran
University of Washington

The Fus Fixico Letters. Edited by Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr. and Carol A. Petty Hunter. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993. 302 pages. \$37.50 cloth.

Jointly edited by Carol A. Petty Hunter and Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr., *The Fus Fixico Letters* is the first published collection of Alexander Posey's satirical pieces written in the persona of Fus Fixico. These sketches circulated in Oklahoma's American Indian newspapers in the early 1900s. Posey (1873–1908), a Creek poet, humorist, journalist, and educator was the owner and editor of *The Indian Journal*, a newspaper printed in Eufaula, Indian Territory. The newspaper served not only a local Creek readership but a non-Indian public that extended into the adjoining Oklahoma Territory, Kansas, Arkansas, and Texas as well. *The Indian Journal* was one of many Indian newspapers circulating in what is now Oklahoma before it was admitted to the Union as one state in 1906. Those newspapers often carried dialect columns given over to humorous federal, local, and tribal sociopolitical commentary. Active in politics as well as journalism, Posey became the secretary in 1905 of the Sequoyah convention, an Indian group pushing for dual statehood for Oklahoma. The proposed arrangement would allow the western part of the state to enter the Union as Oklahoma and the eastern part to enter as the state of Sequoyah. Oklahoma would be governed by a white majority and Sequoyah