

Fort Union Trading Post

FORT UNION'S ARTISTS

GEORGE CATLIN (1796-1872)

George Catlin was born in Pennsylvania, where he studied law, but changed his plans after becoming passionate about art. After being introduced to native tribes of the west by travelling delegations and artifacts, he went to St. Louis in 1830 to start drawing American Indians. He vowed, "...the history and customs of such a people preserved by pictorial illustrations

are themselves worthy the life-time of one man, and nothing short of the loss of my life shall prevent me from visiting their country, and of becoming their historian." His studies brought him to Fort Union in 1832 aboard the *Yellow Stone*, the first steamboat to make the trip upriver.

Catlin made a sketch first and finished the painting later. His pictures were fairly rough; popular thought was that a rough, quickly done sketch better captured initial impressions. The most finished aspect was the head and face. Some clothing is detailed, but other times he decided not to include "such trappings and ornaments as interfered with the grace and simplicity of the figure." His color palette was limited, with many earth tones, and to brighten his picture he used white or yellow to bring out highlights.

He observed the land and its resources, including animals and geology. In landscapes, he tried to convey his personal impressions. He described the prairie as "green-carpeted bluffs

whose soft grassy tops, invited me to recline... whose thousand velvet covered hills... tossing and leaping down with steep or graceful declivities to the



George Catlin, *Buffalo Bull, A Grand Pawnee Warrior*

river's edge, as if to grace its pictured shores..." He visited the Sioux's Pipestone Quarry in present day Minnesota, and the sample he brought back was named Catlinite.

In 1837 he campaigned for the U.S. government to buy his Indian Gallery, but was unable to sell it. He displayed it in London, bringing Iowa and Ojibwa to demonstrate native dance. The shows were successful for a time, but Catlin could not maintain a profit and fell into debt, forcing him to sell his gallery to a private collector. The Smithsonian did not acquire the collection until after he died.

Catlin took ethnology out of the library and into the field, setting the trend for later artists and scientists.

KARL BODMER (1809-1893)

Catlin was soon followed by Karl Bodmer, a Swiss artist who was hired by Prince Maximilian of Wied to document his expedition. The Prince would record and collect specimens while Bodmer sketched. They

travelled up the Missouri River in 1833 and visited the forts along the way, including Fort Union.

Using pencil and watercolor, Bodmer was extremely conscientious of detail. He showed the intricacy of his subject's dress and ornamentation. Rituals and objects were recorded, showing the influence of trade with the presence of horses and beads. His landscapes included drama and life, with expansive views, dramatic clouds, and birds passing through. This made his pictures more than strict scientific records of features; they conveyed a sense of place.

When the expedition members reached Fort McKenzie in Montana, they witnessed a Cree and Assiniboine attack on the Blackfeet, making them aware of the danger in the region and convincing them to turn back.

Bodmer had several advantages over Catlin—he could take his time since Prince Maximilian was not travelling with any hurry, and he did not have to worry about selling his pictures later, since the Prince had already arranged to purchase his work.

JOHN JAMES AUDUBON (1785-1851)

Wildlife enthusiast John James Audubon was raised in France, but he came to America to avoid conscription into Napoleon's army. In 1807 he went



Karl Bodmer, *Assiniboine Medicine Sign*

to Kentucky to become a merchant, where he made friends with a group of highly educated people who influenced him to use a scientific approach to his interest in nature and birds in particular.

Audubon was strong-willed. When rats gnawed about 200 of his drawings in storage, he quickly pulled himself together and vowed to make even better ones.

Audubon used pencil, crayon, or pastels combined with watercolor, ink, or oil. He killed his subject, not worried about animals which were abundant in the area, and then positioned it as if it were alive, avoiding the stiff compositions of many other wildlife artists. Using wires, Audubon fixed the bird to a board scored with a grid. His paper had a corresponding grid so that he could get an accurately proportioned drawing. Primarily interested in birds, he showed them in action and in their natural habitat, though sometimes the background was filled in by other artists.

He was skilled in showing texture, whether sleek feathers or soft fur. After his book of birds, Audubon planned one on quadrupeds of North America, which brought him to Fort Union in 1843. However, by 1846 he could not see well enough to finish; he died in 1851.

Audubon was applauded as an artist, but his science was criticized. He was the first to band migratory birds to see if they return to the same areas. However, he published a paper on rattlesnakes which was ridiculed, particularly his story about rattlesnakes climbing trees. He decided to limit himself to drawings, but when he sought someone to write the scientific text for his books, he had difficulty finding someone who would tolerate his refusal to share the title page credits.

Despite his trouble with rattle-



John James Audubon, *Thirteen-Lined Ground Squirrel*

snakes, by the end of his life Audubon was the expert on North American birds.

RUDOLPH FRIEDERICH KURZ (1818-1866)

An acquaintance of Bodmer, Rudolph Friederich Kurz was born in Switzerland during a time of political and civil unrest in Europe; Switzerland experienced a short civil war in 1847. Kurz "...longed for unknown lands, where no demands of citizenship would involve me in the vortex of political agitations...where there is neither overlordship of the bourgeois nor

the selfishness of the rich who treasure their wealth in splendid idleness, while the fine arts languish...I would devote my talents to the portrayal of the aboriginal forests, the wild animals that inhabited them, and to the Indians."

Bodmer convinced him to further practice his drawing before travelling to America. Kurz spent three years studying in Paris; at one point he became so frustrated that he tied a stone to his pictures and threw them in a river. By 1846 he decided he was ready and travelled to New Orleans. Kurz was concerned about the war between Mexico and the U.S., so he went north to St. Louis and travelled the surrounding rivers. In 1848 he went to St. Joseph, where he visited Indian camps and was briefly married to an Iowa named Witthae, before she became homesick and ran away. Needing funds, he tried to buy and sell horses but abandoned that plan after losing money.



Rudolph Friederich Kurz, *Fort Union 1851*

He took a steamboat up the Missouri, along with Alexander Culbertson, a former bourgeois of Fort Union. He realized

working as a clerk for a fur company would give him the opportunity to travel and observe native tribes while still being able to earn money to support himself. With Culbertson's help, Kurz got a position as a clerk at Fort Berthold, an American Fur Company post. He sketched Indians as well as others involved in the fur trade. Kurz

made sketches in ink or graphite; he brought watercolors, which he liked less than oils, but took up less space and dried more quickly. He constantly looked for an "ideal human form" among the tribes. His ideal form must have included delicate appendages, since many of his hands and feet are disproportionately small.

When cholera broke out, the tribes blamed his constant observing and sketching, and Kurz was forced to leave for Fort Union in 1851. There he painted buildings, and he made portraits such as one of Edwin Denig, the bourgeois, and also Denig's dog. The dog's death a short time later did nothing to reassure natives who were already uneasy about the effects of having their portraits drawn, so he sketched the buildings in the fort. He left Fort Union in 1852 and returned to Switzerland to work on paintings from his studies.

Kurz took a job as an art teacher in Bern to support himself. He died there 19 years later without producing the series of paintings he had envisioned. Many of his sketches were burned by his family due to his nude drawings. Kurz's remaining sketches, however, are invaluable for their depictions of the fur trade and were used in reconstructing Fort Union.