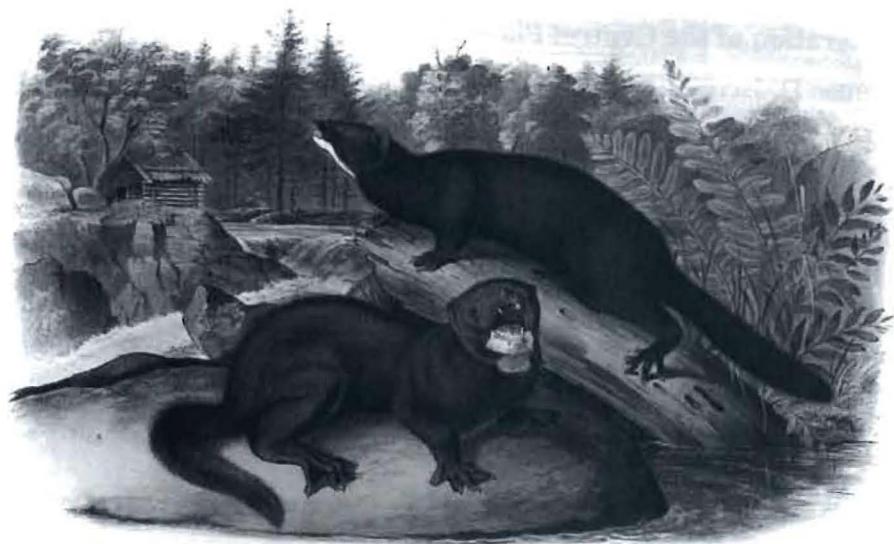




Common Mouse, from John James Audubon, *The Quadrupeds of North America*, 1849-54.



American Mink, from John James Audubon, *The Quadrupeds of North America*, 1849-54.

Catlin And Audubon – Impressions of the Fur Trade Frontier

by
Brad Tennant

When Frederick Jackson Turner presented his seminal work in 1893 on the significance of the frontier in American History, he specifically summarized, albeit arguably, the previous ninety years of American frontier history in the trans-Mississippi West. Regarding the progression of the various frontiers, Turner wrote, “Stand at the Cumberland Gap and watch the procession of civilization, marching single file – the buffalo following the trail to the salt springs, the Indian, the fur-trader and hunter, the cattle-raiser, the pioneer farmer – and the frontier has passed by. Stand at South Pass in the Rockies a century later and see the same procession with wider intervals between.”¹ Indeed, beginning with the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, the American West witnessed the passing of the Plains Indian buffalo culture, the era of the Rocky Mountain fur trade, wagon trails, gold rushes, Indian wars, and pioneer settlement – all by the time Turner wrote his frontier thesis. While historians are indebted to those who wrote about these frontier stages, one group deserves special attention for their work as ethnographers and naturalists: the artists of the nineteenth century American West.² Two such artists were George Catlin and John James Audubon, who each visited the fur trading posts of Fort Pierre, Fort Clark, and Fort Union journaling, sketching, and painting their impressions of the fur trade and its impact on the native peoples and wildlife. Although only eleven years separated Catlin’s 1832 visit up the Missouri River and Audubon’s 1843 trip, the two renowned artists often expressed very different impressions of the fur trade frontier.

In 1822, while in the early stages of his career as a portrait artist, Catlin witnessed a group of western Indians as they passed through Philadelphia on their tour of the eastern United States.³ As Catlin observed the members of the group in their native dress, he already knew that the westward movement of the white man would soon alter

Dr. Brad Tennant is an Associate Professor of History at Presentation College in Aberdeen, South Dakota. Tennant is an active researcher, writer, and presenter on a variety of topics related to South Dakota and the northern Great Plains.

the traditional lifestyles of the Indians located west of the Mississippi River. Such a realization greatly contributed to Catlin's determination that he would someday travel to the Indian nations of the West and become "their historian" through his artwork.⁴

Eventually, Catlin made his way to St. Louis in the spring of 1830 where he became friends with two notable individuals who each lent their support to his ambitious goal of recording the people and events of the upper Missouri. The first was General William Clark, whose role as Superintendent of Indian Affairs made him a valuable supporter by condoning Catlin's extensive travels among many of the western tribes during the 1830s. The second person to whom Catlin owed a great deal of gratitude was Pierre Chouteau, Jr., who already was one of the most significant participants of the fur trade era. Since Chouteau oversaw the American Fur Company's operations as far north as the company's Fort Union post, Catlin's friendship with Chouteau proved to be quite fortuitous.⁵

Catlin returned to St. Louis in the spring of 1832 depending on his recently established acquaintances with Clark and Chouteau to carry out his planned visit to the upper Missouri region. Having already gained the confidence and support of General Clark, Catlin began making arrangements with Chouteau for passage upriver. It should be noted that, the previous year, the American Fur Company introduced its steamboat, the *Yellowstone*, to the Missouri River, and it ventured as far as Fort Pierre. The 1832 voyage, however, planned to travel to the Fort Union trading post near the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers, a distance of approximately 2,000 miles from St. Louis.⁶ The *Yellowstone's* trip to Fort Union marked the beginning of steamboat travel on the upper Missouri and a new era of transportation for the region's fur trade.⁷ In fact, fur trade historian Hiram M. Chittenden noted the significance of the *Yellowstone's* travels as "a landmark in the history of the West." According to Chittenden, the *Yellowstone's* success "demonstrated the practicability of navigating the Missouri by steam as far as to the mouth of the Yellowstone with a strong probability that boats could go on to the Blackfoot country." Chittenden further noted that the presence of Catlin as a passenger "added celebrity to the voyage."⁸

The *Yellowstone* departed St. Louis on March 26, 1832; however, it soon became apparent that steamboat traffic on the Missouri River faced a variety of challenges. Despite the higher spring water levels,

overhanging branches, floating driftwood, hidden stumps, and sandbars presented constant obstacles. As a result, such challenges restricted travel to daylight hours; however, even then, the murkiness of the Missouri often made it difficult to see such obstacles.⁹ Catlin already decided that he would take the steamboat as far as Fort Union where he would spend some time in the area before returning by canoe. This plan would allow him time to leisurely travel downriver and to visit sites and tribes along the way.¹⁰

The American Fur Company's trading posts at Fort Pierre, Fort Clark, and Fort Union were not only important to the fur trade, but they also afforded visitors such as Catlin and Audubon excellent opportunities to see the role of the fur trade firsthand and its impact on the native peoples and wildlife. Indeed, it was from these trading posts that Catlin did some of his most well-known works as a painter.¹¹ At a distance of approximately 200 miles from Fort Pierre, the *Yellowstone* ran onto a sandbar. Since the captain and crew of the steamboat could do little until there was a rise in the water level, Chouteau decided to send a group of men by land to Fort Pierre. Catlin, eager to visit the post located in the midst of Sioux country, voluntarily joined the party.¹² As if the trek of a couple hundred miles was not bad enough, several of Chouteau's men were also laden with the task of carrying Catlin's painting supplies, including canvasses, paints, and brushes.¹³ On a more positive note, given the status of the *Yellowstone*, Catlin spent more time than originally planned at Fort Pierre, which gave him ample opportunity to capture his first impressions in his sketches and paintings.¹⁴

Four years earlier, in 1828, the American Fur Company decided to construct Fort Pierre to replace the aging Fort Tecumseh, an early Columbia Fur Company post. The American Fur Company built the new trading post a few miles above the mouth of the Bad River in present-day central South Dakota and named it in honor of Pierre Chouteau, Jr. Catlin sketched the post placing it in the distance with many, neatly placed rows of tipis surrounding it along with the bluffs and rolling prairie hills common along the Missouri River. In describing the area, Catlin wrote:

The country about this Fort is almost entirely prairie, producing along the banks of the river and streams only, slight skirtings of timber. No site could have been selected more pleasing or more advantageous than this;

the Fort is in the centre of one of the Missouri's most beautiful plains, and hemmed in by a series of gracefully undulating, grass-covered hills, on all sides; rising like a series of terraces, to the summit level of the prairies, some three or four hundred feet in elevation, which then stretches off in an apparently boundless ocean of gracefully swelling waves and fields of green.¹⁵

Although his drawings of Fort Pierre include few specifics about the fort, Catlin described it as being well-built, about 200 or 300 feet square, and enclosing a variety of factories, houses, apartments, and stores. At the time of his arrival, Catlin stated that Fort Pierre already established itself as one of the most important posts of the fur trade, "drawing from all quarters an immense and almost incredible number of buffalo robes, which are carried to the New York and other Eastern markets, and sold at a great profit."¹⁶ For Catlin, this was precisely the type of venue that he sought for his work.

After his week-long march, the greatly fatigued Catlin arrived at Fort Pierre where he presented himself to American Fur Company officials William Laidlaw, Kenneth McKenzie, and Jacob Halsey. Soon thereafter, Laidlaw introduced Catlin to some of the notable Sioux leaders whose camps surrounded the trading post in anticipation of personally witnessing the eventual arrival of the steamboat. In fact, one of Catlin's first observations as he approached Fort Pierre was the 600 to 700 skin lodges that housed the large number of Sioux people visiting the post. When the *Yellowstone* finally arrived, Catlin recorded his amusement at "the excitement and dismay caused amongst 6000 of these wild people" as they stood along the shoreline watching the steamboat as it chugged up the river.¹⁷

The Sioux leaders whom Catlin met impressed him greatly, and he soon decided that much of what non-Indian trappers and traders told him about the Sioux was false. Whereas he expected the Sioux to be a nation of poor, drunken murderers, he instead perceived them as a proud, noble people. At the same time, he noted that alcohol had not been a problem among the Sioux until Christians introduced it as a trade good.¹⁸ Catlin sought to capture the traditional images of the Sioux before the white man's influence further deteriorated their culture. Consequently, Catlin spent his time at Fort Pierre convincing many of the higher ranking Sioux leaders to sit for their portraits. After completing his portrait of

the chief known as The One Horn, Catlin, however, received mixed reactions by the Sioux. On the one hand, many admired the resemblance that Catlin captured in his painting and heralded him as a magician of sorts. Thus, to his admirers, Catlin soon became known as *Ee-cha-zoo-kah-ga-wakon* or the medicine painter. On the other hand, a significant opposition to Catlin's paintings soon developed by those who feared that the uncanny likeness meant premature death or bad luck to those who sat for their portraits. This view that his paintings were a bad omen became significant enough that many of the fur traders at the fort became concerned for Catlin's safety. Eventually, however, many of the opponents began accepting the positive view of the admirers.¹⁹

Since low water delayed the *Yellowstone* from continuing its upriver trip, Catlin took advantage of his time at Fort Pierre by broadening the scope of his artwork and writings to include the lifestyles of both the Sioux and the trappers who frequented the trading post. By describing and painting individuals in their native dress as well as many traditional ceremonies, Catlin became the first artist-ethnographer of the Sioux and, later, many other upper Missouri tribes. In addition, Catlin noted that many of the mountain men arrived with their packs of furs and appeared "impatient for a fight" with other trappers. Although the fights that occurred resulted in many a trapper being bloodied, Catlin stated that the fighting most often took place in make-shift rings, followed guidelines of fairness, and generally resulted in many rambunctious trappers, who experienced sound beatings, becoming more civil by the time they returned to the mountains.²⁰

In addition to the rapidly changing native cultures and the presence of fur trappers and traders, the immense herds of buffalo on the plains also left a notable impression on Catlin. For instance, during the walk from the *Yellowstone* to Fort Pierre, Catlin's party noted impressively large herds of buffalo. Inspired by the magnificent appearance of this animal, Catlin painted and wrote a great deal about buffalo throughout his 1832 trip. Regardless of Catlin's admiration, he expressed his concern that, like the Indian, the buffalo was "rapidly wasting away at the approach of civilized man." To Catlin, the introduction of whiskey and other trade goods in return for buffalo robes greatly contributed to the bleak future and the demise of the buffalo.²¹

Eventually, Catlin once again boarded the *Yellowstone*, said goodbye to Fort Pierre, and arrived at Fort Union on June 16, 1832. Fort Union, the American Fur Company's most valued trading post, had

been Catlin's destination ever since the *Yellowstone* left St. Louis approximately 2,000 miles and nearly three months earlier. As with his experience at Fort Pierre, Catlin quickly seized the opportunity at Fort Union to record his impressions through sketches and paintings. For a full half hour before the *Yellowstone's* arrival at Fort Union, Catlin observed Indians running and yelling along the shoreline amazed at the appearance of the steamboat, while cannons repeatedly thundered notice of its arrival. According to Catlin, the scene presented "the most thrilling and picturesque appearance."²² Over the next several weeks, Catlin continued to profess that the people and beauty of the upper Missouri made it among the most romantic locations for an artist to practice his vocation. Although this was exactly the setting that he sought for his work, it would be interesting to hear what the rough and tumble crowd of trappers and traders said about Catlin behind his back. It is easy to imagine how the men at the posts must have laughed at him for his flowery language as well as his refusal to smoke and drink.²³ If Catlin was indeed aware of such ridicule, he did not let it hamper his mission.

The importance of Fort Union lay primarily with its strategic location at the confluence of the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers. Perhaps the richest beaver country in the West existed here; however, American fur trappers and traders had to deal with some formidable challenges. Cree, Blackfeet, Piegan, Crow, and Assiniboine Indians were among the notable tribes who occupied the region. Although tribes such as the Crow and the Blackfeet openly fought each another, Catlin noted that the tribes recognized Fort Union as a no-fighting zone where their differences would be put aside should warring tribes be present at the same time. Meanwhile, the Assiniboine and British often had a negative impact on the American trade along the United States-Canada borderland. Finally, the Blackfeet also had a long history of opposing American traders, and it was not until 1830 that they began trading with the United States.²⁴ During his stay at Fort Union, Catlin learned that the Blackfeet were long considered the most powerful and fearsome tribe in the region. Since their domain included a rich bounty of beaver and buffalo, the American Fur Company constantly risked sending trappers into their lands despite warnings by the Blackfeet that any man caught doing so would be killed. These were not idle threats since, during the height of the tribe's resistance, the American Fur Company lost between fifteen to twenty men at the hands of the Blackfeet. Despite a history

of formidable resistance by the tribe, Catlin once again expressed his chagrin that the fur trade would be as detrimental to this nation of Indians as it previously had been to many others. Catlin sarcastically wrote that the trinkets and whiskey introduced by the fur trade would eventually leave the Blackfeet “to inhabit, and at last to starve upon, a dreary and solitary waste.”²⁵

Since Catlin primarily focused on the native populations, animals, and scenery that surrounded the forts, his sketches of both Fort Pierre and Fort Union often show them as mere structures in a distant background. To the viewer, it appears that his work focused very little on the forts themselves. Nonetheless, as with Fort Pierre, what his sketches of Fort Union lacked in detail, Catlin reported more in depth in his writings. In fact, Catlin knew that the impact of the fur trade frontier created a sense of urgency that drew him to the upper Missouri in the first place. Furthermore, it did not take Catlin long to realize that Fort Union, under the leadership of Kenneth McKenzie, oversaw much of the American Fur Company’s business westward to the Rocky Mountains. Catlin stated that it was a substantial, well-fortified post, which made it safe from possible Indian attacks. At 300 feet square, Fort Union sat strategically on a stretch of prairie with access to both the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers. Within its fortifications were log houses and stores of goods for the forty to fifty men who occupied the fort as well as for replenishing the supplies of the men when they rendezvoused at the fort and for trading directly with area Indian tribes.²⁶ In short, Catlin did not underestimate the significance of Fort Union, although many of his sketches of the post leave a lot to be desired.

Catlin spent the next month in and around Fort Union sketching and painting a variety of images that caught his eye. His gracious host, McKenzie, provided Catlin with a room in one of the fort’s bastions where he sat with his paints and canvass. In this make-shift painting studio, Catlin painted the portraits of Indians representing a number of the area tribes while he used the breech end of a 12 pounder cannon for his seat. In addition to portraits, Catlin also painted scenes of Indians engaged in group games, dances, and buffalo hunts.²⁷ Of course, Catlin observed these latter scenes from outside the walls of Fort Union. One such example occurred when Catlin rode with McKenzie and several other men from the fort on a buffalo hunt. Ironically, although Catlin often criticized the fur trade frontier for its aggregate destruction of animals such as the buffalo, Catlin admitted that he wanted to kill a

buffalo for himself. However, his objective was not that of procuring meat; rather, he wanted a trophy of a buffalo head and horns as a souvenir from his experiences. He succeeded in getting his trophy, and as the buffalo that he shot snorted and staggered, Catlin quickly opened his sketchbook and drew the animal in its final stage of life.²⁸

After spending nearly a month at Fort Union, Catlin prepared to return to St. Louis. As previously mentioned, Catlin originally planned to take a canoe down the Missouri by himself, thus allowing him the opportunity to stop whenever he wished. As he prepared for his downriver voyage, however, he agreed to have two French-Canadian trappers accompany him. The trappers, whom Catlin mentioned as Ba'tiste and Bogard, entertained the artist with numerous stories of their wilderness adventures. Ba'tiste and Bogard apparently had no problem with Catlin's frequent stops so that he could quickly sketch or paint the wildlife and bluffs found along the Missouri River, even though this meant that the trip to St. Louis would take considerably longer. A week after leaving Fort Union, the three travelers arrived at the American Fur Company's Fort Clark, where the fort's factor, James Kipp, hosted Catlin for almost a month.²⁹

With Kipp as his host, Catlin visited the nearby Mandan and Hidatsa villages where he focused his artwork on more portraits, as well as many cultural aspects of these Indian village farmers. From mid-July through mid-August, Catlin's work on the Mandan proved to be the most notable highlight of his entire 1832 trip. In fact, Catlin devoted more pages in his book on North American Indians to the Mandan than any other single tribe. While his works titled *Indian Council* and *The Bear Dance* are often recognized as some of his finest works, art historian Joan Carpenter Troccoli argues otherwise in a critique of Catlin. One of Troccoli's negative comments notes that Catlin often produced rushed, generic portraits of individual Indians, which sometimes produced a caricature effect rather than a true portrait of a person. On the other hand, Troccoli applauds Catlin, more often than not, for his special attention to distinctive features of his subjects, including facial expressions and poses that created lively scenes.³⁰

As previously mentioned, throughout his 1832 trip on the upper Missouri, Catlin faced mixed reactions from Indian individuals. Overall, his ability to capture a person's likeness so well caused many to regard him as a man of strong medicine. At the same time, there were always those who disliked his work and felt that his portraits would

only mean bad consequences for those whom he painted. Such was the case when Catlin painted a picture of a young Mandan girl who later died. Although the girl was already ill at the time that Catlin painted her, the fact that she died soon thereafter caused him to be blamed for the bad medicine that killed the girl.³¹ Later, other non-Indian critics questioned the accuracy of the images and scenes that were the focus of Catlin's artwork. As a result, Catlin procured a number of statements, which he called *Certificates of Likeness*, from individuals, including William Clark and Kenneth McKenzie, testifying to his faithful and accurate representations of his 1832 experiences while visiting the upper Missouri.³² Nonetheless, one of Catlin's earliest and biggest critics would be John James Audubon, who made a similar trip up the Missouri River in 1843.

Although Catlin is credited for being the first notable artist who traveled up the Missouri River during the 19th century, others soon followed. It is, therefore, quite understandable why later artists often referred to the work of Catlin as a standard for what they also saw or what they expected to see. Of all of the artists who succeeded Catlin, Audubon is noted as perhaps the one person who most stringently compared and contrasted his impressions of the upper Missouri valley to those of Catlin. In some cases, Audubon made favorable comparisons to Catlin, while in others, he noted that the differences were so compelling that he openly questioned the validity of Catlin's work.

Audubon's success as a wildlife painter came from his extensive travels to observe animals firsthand in their natural environments. At the age of 58, Audubon prepared to make one last trip into the wilderness – a trip to the upper Missouri and Yellowstone river valleys and, he hoped, into the Rockies. Unfortunately, health problems prevented him from venturing into the mountains; however, like Catlin, he traveled as far as Fort Union and its surrounding region.³³ Given his reputation as a naturalist and artist, he originally hoped that the government would provide funding for his trip, but he was unable to secure any federal support. Like Catlin, Audubon realized that his best option lay with gaining the support of the American Fur Company's Pierre Chouteau, Jr. Subsequently, on April 25, 1843, Audubon boarded the American Fur Company's steamboat *Omega* and left St. Louis.³⁴ This was not a solitary trip for Audubon, as he later wrote that the boat carried "a hundred and one trappers of all descriptions and nearly a dozen different nationalities."³⁵ For Audubon, this would be his opportunity to witness

firsthand the impact of the fur trade frontier in its twilight stages.

As the *Omega* moved slowly against the Missouri current, Audubon noted the visible changes from the settled farming communities near St. Louis to the more sparsely settled traders' frontier and the animal life found farther upriver near Fort Pierre and beyond. Early in the morning on May 18, 1843, the *Omega*'s captain informed Audubon that they were meeting four barges, which were passing downriver from Fort Pierre. Among the passengers on board the boats heading to St. Louis was William Laidlaw, who was still heavily involved in much of the Fort Pierre trade operations. Just as Catlin did in 1832, Audubon introduced himself to Laidlaw and asked questions about what to expect upriver. At the time, the four barges were laden with 10,000 buffalo robes, and Laidlaw and his party told Audubon that there would soon be buffalo by the thousands approximately another 100 miles ahead.³⁶

Upon approaching Fort Pierre, Audubon noted its general appearance with its four bastions; unfortunately, he did not go into any other specifics.³⁷ The *Omega* reached Fort Pierre on May 31, 1843, and, although the stopover was only for a day, Audubon quickly began sketching as much as he could. His sketches included the post's small herd of buffalo calves, various birds, a grizzly bearskin, elk antlers, and a variety of other animal curiosities. Upon request, he visited the storehouse where he saw eight or ten packages of "White Hare skins" prepared for shipping. He also noted the general description of how the tipis surrounding the fort were constructed. The next day, the *Omega* resumed its journey. Approximately fifty of the trappers who traveled on board from St. Louis stayed at Fort Pierre, while most of those who remained planned on traveling to Fort Union.³⁸ With less cargo and fewer men, the steamboat soon began moving at a faster pace, reaching Fort Union on June 12, 1843.³⁹ On the return trip, Audubon stayed at Fort Pierre from September 8th through the 14th of 1843, although rain hampered much of his activity. Despite several rainy days, Audubon used the time to do "several drawings of objects in and about the fort."⁴⁰

As Catlin did eleven years prior, Audubon regularly recorded his thoughts on American Indians. Whereas Catlin sought to capture images of Indians before the fur trade could further change their lifestyles, Audubon's perceptions derived after the fur trade irreversibly changed much of the traditional native cultures. The contrast between Catlin and Audubon's impressions of the fur trade frontier are certainly the greatest when it comes to their respective views regarding the effect

on American Indians. For example, Audubon quickly developed the opinion that Indians were poor, dirty, and untrustworthy, while Catlin repeatedly admired the noble character of the native populations. On May 13, 1843, eleven Omaha Indians hailed the *Omega* hoping that it would stop; however, Audubon noted that the captain ignored them because “he hates the red-skins.” Audubon then recorded in his journal that “They looked as destitute and as hungry as if they had not eaten for a week, and no doubt would have given much for a bottle of whiskey” and then added, “I pity these poor beings from my heart!”⁴¹ Several days later, Audubon described how many Indians were so hungry that they often sought drowned buffalo floating down the river, regardless of how rotten and putrid the carcasses might be. The contrast with Catlin’s painted and written images was evident as Audubon wrote, “Ah! Mr. Catlin, I am now sorry to see and to read your accounts of the Indians that *you* saw – how very different they must have been from any that I have seen!”⁴²

In reading Audubon’s journal entries, his impressions of Indians appear to be largely shaped by the traders and trappers with whom he traveled and visited. Upon arriving at Fort Union, Audubon witnessed a group of Indians visiting the post whom he described as filthy and smelly and whose yelling and singing created an appearance, according to Audubon, of “so many devils.”⁴³ As his impressions of disgust and distrust of Indians in general were forged, he also became increasingly critical of Catlin. For instance, when Audubon arrived at the Mandan villages near Fort Clark, he was quick to challenge Catlin’s painting of a Mandan village. According to Audubon, “The Mandan mud huts are very far from looking poetical, although Mr. Catlin has tried to render them so by placing them in regular rows, and all of the same size and form, which is by no means the case. But different travellers (sic) have different eyes!”⁴⁴ Audubon increasingly questioned Catlin’s earlier impressions of Indian life. Overall, Catlin visited nearly fifty Indian nations during the period 1832-1840, and he produced over five hundred oil paintings of Indians with special attention given to customs and clothing. Audubon, on the other hand, questioned Catlin’s paintings that showed Indians who were elegantly dressed since the Indians whom he met were dirty. Audubon even went so far as to describe Catlin’s work as “humbug.”⁴⁵

As expected, the farther Audubon traveled up the Missouri, the more buffalo he saw. Upon inquiry, he learned that the presence of

buffalo herds depended on such factors as the weather conditions and the availability of grasslands for grazing and areas where the herds were not as likely to be disturbed. Considering these factors, buffalo were often visible in significant numbers within a short distance from Fort Union, while at other times, hunters might have to travel 25-30 miles in order to find a herd. Audubon learned that, during the winter season, hay scattered outside of Fort Union kept the buffalo close at hand. Fort personnel even attempted to corral some bison by leading them to an old fortification-turned-corral by placing a path of hay through the gates. The buffalo, however, would not enter through the gates into the area where hogs and cattle were kept. Nonetheless, the scattering of hay kept many buffalo conveniently close to Fort Union. On one occasion, a shot fired from a four-pounder killed three buffalo and wounded several others. Despite such hunting practices, a number of the animals tended to stay close enough to the post for hunters to readily shoot them throughout the winter season.⁴⁶

Just as Catlin did in the early 1830s, Audubon also experienced the excitement of a buffalo hunt. For both artists, hunting buffalo remained a lasting impression, one that they each recorded in their respective journals and in their artwork. And just as Catlin noted during his stay at Fort Union, Audubon wondered how long the buffalo herds would remain. Despite seeing large herds nonchalantly grazing on the open prairie, he noted that thousands of buffalo skins were being transported downriver. According to Audubon, the great herds of buffalo could not last, and “even now there is a perceptible difference in the size of the herds, and before many years the Buffalo, like the Great Auk, will have disappeared; surely this should not be permitted.”⁴⁷

Given the artistic instincts of both Audubon and Catlin, it is not surprising that they each described landscapes too. Audubon’s general description of the location of Fort Union was similar to that of Catlin’s in that it included mention of fertile soil along the river banks, along with timber, while the rolling prairies above the river valley extended into the distance in every direction.⁴⁸ Audubon even went so far as to draw an image of two ground squirrels with a small image of Fort Union and the Missouri River seen in the distance between the animals.⁴⁹ Of course, if beauty is truly in the eye of the beholder, the artists definitely had some differences in what they noted of the physical landscape. For example, Audubon, at one point, was astonished by the poor appearance

of the bluffs, which were dry, crumbling, and whose ravines were filled with trees that were now dead and barren. On yet another occasion, he mentioned that the boat passed some beautiful scenery, which he then qualified a few sentences later by stating that, although he observed many curious cliffs, none of them matched Catlin's drawings.⁵⁰ Audubon further criticized Catlin by writing that "We have seen nothing of the extravagant Views of the Country given in Cattlin's (sic) Books . . ." ⁵¹

When Audubon was not critiquing Catlin, he busied himself by hunting, observing, and sketching the variety of birds and mammals found in the upper Missouri region. In fact, the primary reason for his trip was to conduct a detailed study of the animal life – a study for which Audubon has since been criticized for its lack of substance. During his stay at Fort Union, Audubon spent some time in the same room that quartered Maximilian, Prince of Wied, when he and the artist Karl Bodmer spent time at the trading post in 1833-1834.⁵² From these quarters, he planned to collect as much information as possible about the quadrupeds of the area; however, after two months at Fort Union, Audubon regretted that he had little to add to what was already known. In correspondence sent from St. Louis after his return, he claimed to have



Mandan Village, George Catlin, circa 1833

information on approximately 14 new species of birds and only three or four new quadrupeds. Although he emphasized that he produced many good sketches of flowers, landscapes, and the more common animals such as buffalo, wolves, and antelope, this did not sit well with his good friend and supporter John Bachman. Bachman had been asked to advise and help coauthor Audubon's book about his 1843 Missouri River trip, but he expressed great disappointment with the lack of new material with which Audubon returned.⁵³

Of course, in retrospect, whether one examines Catlin or Audubon and their respective focus on Indian life, animals, or other changes that were taking place, a major emphasis of both artists, either directly or indirectly, centered on their impressions of the fur trade frontier. Catlin hoped to capture the native peoples before their traditional ways were gone forever, yet his 1832 trip occurred at a time when the Rocky Mountain fur trade was well underway. His writings and artwork tended to romanticize the wilderness and contributed greatly to the noble image of the American Indian.⁵⁴ His images, whether in print or on canvass, tended to be too glowing, too poetic, and too positive to be accepted by many as true-to-life images. It is as if he often tried to perceive what it was like prior to the fur trade, not during. Conversely, Audubon's 1843 trip and his focus on wildlife occurred after the fur trade of the Upper Missouri and the Rocky Mountains already declined. As such, his frequent cynicism related more to the lasting impact of the fur trade and what little remained in its wake.⁵⁵ In either case, the presence of the fur trade frontier drew both artists to trading posts such as Fort Pierre, Fort Clark, and Fort Union, and both artists were well aware that change was ongoing. Without the support of individuals such as Pierre Chouteau, Jr., William Laidlaw, and Kenneth McKenzie, neither artist would have been able to undertake such expeditions up the Missouri River. Audubon admired the courage of those who traveled, hunted, trapped, and traded in America's wilderness; however, like Catlin, he also knew that it was only a matter of time before civilization tamed the wilderness. As the fur trade frontier gave way to the mining, ranching, and farming frontiers, Audubon reflected on these changes and wrote, "Whether these changes are for the better or for the worse, I shall not pretend to say."⁵⁶

Historian Ray Allen Billington once said that "Man's artistic creations are, to the historian, invaluable keys to an understanding of

the past.”⁵⁷ Without question, George Catlin and John James Audubon, along with many other artists of the nineteenth century American West, deserve to be recognized for their impressions of the fur trade frontier, both as ethnographers and as naturalists.

ENDNOTES

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- 3 Terry J. Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, Ltd., 2001), 179.
- 4 Ewers., 72.
- 5 Mildred Goosman, ed., *Exploration in the West: Catlin, Bodmer, Miller* (Omaha, NE: Joslyn Art Museum, 1967), 10.
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- 8 Hiram Martin Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 338.
- 9 Roehm, *Letters of George Catlin*, 58.
- 10 McCracken, *George Catlin and the Old Frontier*, 39.
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- 12 Roehm, *Letters of George Catlin*, 59.
- 13 George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis, MN: Ross & Haines, Inc., 1965), I: 217.
- 14 McCracken, *George Catlin and the Old Frontier*, 48.
- 15 Catlin, *Letters and Notes*, I: 208-209.
- 16 Ibid.; Roehm, *Letters of George Catlin*, 59.

- 17 Catlin, *Letters and Notes*, I: 220, 227.
- 18 Ibid., I: 210.
- 19 Ibid., I: 220-221; Clyde Hollman, *Five Artists of the Old West: George Catlin, Karl Bodmer, Alfred Jacob Miller, Charles M. Russell, and Frederic Remington* (New York: Hastings House, 1965), 29. Although many considered it an honor to have their images painted by Catlin, there were several deaths blamed on him for creating bad medicine.
- 20 Ibid., I: 228.
- 21 Ibid., I: 219, 247, 249.
- 22 Ibid., I: 14-15
- 23 Roehm, *Letters of George Catlin*, 65.
- 24 Ibid., 60-61.
- 25 Catlin, *Letters and Notes*, I: 52.
- 26 Ibid., I: 14, 21.
- 27 Ibid., I: 29; Roehm, *Letters of George Catlin*, 63.
- 28 Catlin, *Letters and Notes*, I: 26.
- 29 Ewers, *Artists of the Old West*, 79.
- 30 Ibid.; Joan Carpenter Troccoli, *First Artist of the West – George Catlin Paintings and Watercolors*, (Tulsa, OK: Gilcrease Museum, 1993), 78, 88.
- 31 Hollman, *Five Artists of the Old West*, 42.
- 32 Catlin, *Letters and Notes*, I: 11-13.
- 33 Scott Russell Sanders, ed., *Audubon Reader – The Best Writings of John James Audubon*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 236.
- 34 Ella M. Foshay, *John James Audubon*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997), 121.
- 35 Sanders, *Audubon Reader – The Best Writings*, 236.
- 36 Christoph Irmscher, *John James Audubon – Writings and Drawings* (New York: The Library of America, 1999), 585.
- 37 John Francis McDermott, *Audubon in the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), 109.

- 38 Irmischer, *Writings and Drawings*, 605-607.
- 39 In his “Missouri River Journals,” Audubon recorded that the *Omega*’s trip of 48 days and seven hours from St. Louis to Fort Union was the fastest on record by nearly 20 days.
- 40 Maria R. Audubon, ed., *Audubon and His Journals*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1900), II: 164-165.
- 41 *Ibid.*, I: 487-488.
- 42 *Ibid.*, I: 497.
- 43 Foshay, *John James Audubon*, 32.
- 44 Sanders, *Audubon Reader – The Best Writings*, 238.
- 45 Foshay, *John James Audubon*, 32.
- 46 Richard Rhodes, ed., *John James Audubon – The Audubon Reader* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 579, 581-582.
- 47 Audubon, *Audubon and His Journals*, II: 131.
- 48 Rhodes, *The Audubon Reader*, 582. A detailed description of the actual trading post by Edwin T. Denig is included in Audubon’s Missouri River journals. Denig was a fur trader and author who worked at Fort Union.
- 49 Foshay, *John James Audubon*, 81. There are at least two versions of this print – one with Fort Union and one without.
- 50 Audubon, *Audubon and His Journals*, I: 530.
- 51 McDermott, *Audubon in the West*, 116.
- 52 Sarah E. Boehme, *John James Audubon in the West: The Last Expedition: Mammals of North America*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2000), 60.
- 53 *Ibid.*, 73, 161; McDermott, *Audubon in the West*, 18-19. Reverend John Bachman shared a strong interest with Audubon as a naturalist, and together, the two wrote and illustrated *The Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America*.
- 54 Boehme, *John James Audubon in the West*, 58.
- 55 *Ibid.*
- 56 Foshay, *John James Audubon*, 110-111.
- 57 Goosman, *Exploration in the West*, 4.