Spring 2010


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All these years later, after several biographies, numbers of exhibitions, and various conference symposia, George Catlin remains an irresistible figure. He was born in 1796 and died in 1872 and in between became one of the best known artists, writers, and showmen of the era. After casting about a bit in his young adulthood, Catlin found his calling out West where in the 1830s he took several trips into what was then Indian country to paint the people and lives he encountered. He produced dozens and dozens of canvasses, many of which now stand as iconic.

John Hausdoerffer hasn't given us another Catlin biography precisely, but rather traces the arc of Catlin's career by offering “five main ‘snapshots’” intended to illustrate Hausdoerffer's main concern: Catlin's “ethics.” We begin the slide show in Philadelphia, where Catlin discovered Peale's Museum and where Catlin had his “epiphany”; the second snapshot focuses on Catlin's presentation of his work to American audiences; we then journey out West to examine what Hausdoerffer calls “Catlin's gaze”; next we are off to Europe where he took his paintings, his artifacts, and a significant number of Native people to exhibit after American audiences grew bored with him; we end finally at Yellowstone National Park, created in the year Catlin died, because Catlin is credited with first proposing the idea of national parks back in 1832.

The point Hausdoerffer explores repeatedly is the tension he finds between Catlin's sympathy for Native people and his outspoken advocacy for them, and his simultaneous endorsement of many of the governing presumptions about them, about nature, and about the American frontier. As he puts it, somewhat awkwardly: “Catlin's expressed intentions are premised upon problematic and unexamined assumptions driving both the position from which he gazed at the West and the way in which he offered a national lament through his gaze.”

In other words, even someone as sensitive to the plight of Native Americans as Catlin could not entirely transcend the cultural and intellectual moment in which he operated. This probably will not come as a surprise to most readers—few of us are really able to do that while also operating effectively in a larger public realm, as Catlin tried to do.

Catlin may be an imperfect hero from our sophisticated twenty-first-century point of view, but he remains among the very few voices from the nineteenth century to offer a different view of Native America than that shared by the vast majority of Americans. Hausdoerffer has not indicted Catlin here, but he has certainly pointed out his limits.

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