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1986

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# PICTURES AND PROSE

## ROMANTIC SENSIBILITY AND THE GREAT PLAINS IN CATLIN, KANE, AND MILLER

ANN DAVIS AND ROBERT THACKER

The romantic movement in America, like that in Europe, was characterized by fondness for the exotic and observation of nature. So the Great Plains and the peoples who lived there were favored topics of artists and writers from the mid-1820s through the 1850s. However, at its height the American romantic movement was challenged by a subtle but persistent search for realism. The distinctions between romanticism and realism in belles lettres were not always recognized, since early visual depictions of the plains were seen primarily as ethnographic material, records of an unknown land and the exotic beings who lived there. The expressly documentary aims

of many of the artists who joined western expeditions are well known, of course. In keeping with the descriptive nature of such missions, many of these artists kept written as well as visual records of their experiences. They shared the nineteenth-century penchant for travel literature of all sorts. Yet despite the documentary aims and achievements of the artists who first made the plains visible to eastern and European audiences, their mission was equally an imaginative, aesthetic one. They tried to depict their subjects in an aesthetically pleasing manner, consistent with inherited late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century artistic conventions. The two aims were not always mutually exclusive, as can be seen by a comparative study of the pictures and prose left by George Catlin, Paul Kane, and Alfred Jacob Miller. We analyze the tension within each painter's art and writing in order to understand the confrontation between an inculcated European aesthetic and what William Goetzmann calls a "new experience of nature."<sup>1</sup>

The work of these three plains artists is especially appropriate for an analysis of the tension between romantic and realistic styles. Catlin, Kane, and Miller reflect the dominant

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[GPQ 6 (Winter 1986): 3-20.]

aesthetic assumptions of their time and at the same time are sufficiently varied in outlook, ability, and impulse to be mutually complementary. In their paintings and writings can be seen the basic tension between an art that records and one that proceeds from the imagination—polarities often called the “mirror” and the “lamp.” More than any other artists, they define and articulate—through pictures and prose—the confrontation (amounting to a catalytic tension) on the Great Plains between European artistic conventions and the artistic challenges posed by new land and its peoples. Afterward, the Europeans’ understanding of both the plains and their corresponding aesthetic was fundamentally changed. In capturing new spectacles, Catlin, Kane and Miller, among others, adapted the old-world conventions to form a new aesthetic. Furthermore these three, who recorded the plains in writing as well as art, furnish us two modes for understanding the informing tensions in their work, while other, equally important artists, such as the Swiss-born Karl Bodmer, offer only the pictorial dimension.

#### BIOGRAPHIES

George Catlin was the first recognized illustrator of the West. His book, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians* (1841) is prominent in the travel literature of the period, being the first copiously illustrated book to deal with the West.<sup>3</sup> Catlin was embarked on a romantic quest. Having studied or associated with Thomas Sulley, John Meagle, and several of the natural scientists who were prominent in Philadelphia in the 1830s, he established himself as a portrait painter of some reputation.<sup>4</sup> Catlin’s romantic resolve stemmed, in part, from his experience with the Indians of the eastern United States. Observing their fatal adaptation to white ways, he realized that the Indians of the Far West were equally doomed. In recalling the purpose of his art, Catlin emphasizes the need to portray the

Indian life-style while, paradoxically, he praises the absence of an art tradition as the primary attraction of the native for the painter:

Man, in the simplicity and loftiness of his nature, unrestrained and unfettered by the disguises of art, is surely the most beautiful model for the painter,—and the country from which he hails is unquestionably the best study or school of the arts in the world: such I am sure, from the models I have seen, is the wilderness of North America. And the history and customs of such a people, preserved by pictorial illustrations, are themes worthy of 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.<sup>5</sup>

Typically, Catlin sees the Indian and the plains as existing in a kind of symbiotic relationship. In his paintings he serves as historian of the plains environment.<sup>6</sup> Whereas his pictorial work—with certain limitations—could be described as realistic, his prose is characterized by romantic excesses. A possible explanation may be that whereas Catlin painted on the spot, in great haste and under extremely difficult conditions, he wrote much of his book while living in London, where he displayed his “Indian Collection” (made up of his paintings, drawings, sketches, assorted memorabilia and, later, Indian people acting out pantomimes of scalping, skulking, and other colorful activities). Thus a double kind of nostalgia may have been operating as he wrote of Indians in their natural environment, far away on the plains.<sup>7</sup> Catlin’s perception of the Indian, like that of many of his contemporaries, was in the tradition of Rousseau.

The experiences of this “historian” of the plains Indian were in keeping with his previously held aesthetic assumptions, certainly, but the Great Plains and its peoples forced him to push those assumptions to their farthest limit, their apotheosis. In this he was not alone. The imaginative adjustment Catlin makes in the most florid terms in *Letters and*

*Notes*—seeing the plains as the most romantic landscape, the Indian as the most romantic being, the buffalo as the most impressive beast—is the same imaginative leap made by Kane, Miller and other nineteenth-century artists who traveled the Great Plains. The new land was in their minds excessively romantic and different from its European counterpart: the air was too clear, the sun too bright, the sights too exotic, the landscape too vast. Imaginatively and practically, the artist had to adjust his conventions. Thus the tension defined by Catlin's separate visions—realistic pictures versus romantic prose—makes him a paradigm of the nineteenth-century plains artist. His extremely romantic prose, by contrasting strikingly with his painted images, points us to the same tendency in Kane and Miller; in their more subtle work, however, the contrast between mirror and lamp is more elusive, although equally evident upon scrutiny.

Paul Kane is the Canadian counterpart of Catlin; like the American, he recorded the land and its people before large-scale settlement. His book, *Wanderings of an Artist Among the Indians of North America* (1858), was inspired at least in part by the success of Catlin's *Letters and Notes*. He probably met Catlin in London just before the latter's return to North America in 1843. In the spring of 1845, Kane returned to North America and resolved to travel west, for his intention was to "represent the scenery of an almost unknown country" and to "sketch pictures of the principal chiefs."<sup>8</sup>

Alfred Jacob Miller, last in the trio of plains painters, was more constrained during his one great expedition. In 1837 the native of Baltimore was hired to illustrate one of Captain (later Sir) William Drummond Stewart's hunting trips up the Platte River to the Rockies. Miller had neither Catlin's sense of mission nor Karl Bodmer's commission to be scientifically accurate; as one critic has noted, his task "was to record, for future transcription into large oils, a miraculous holiday." Upon his return Miller dutifully traveled to Scotland

and transcribed his western work into large oils to adorn his patron's castle. He did a brisk business in producing copies of these works. For one such commission Miller wrote a series of notes to accompany his pictures of western life.

Miller's artistic preparation was considerable. In Baltimore, where he started painting, he may have received instruction from Thomas Sulley, the prominent Philadelphia portraitist and pupil of Sir Thomas Lawrence. Whatever his training, he did enjoy considerable success as a portrait painter, and drew inspiration from the Lawrence portraits he could see at the Baltimore Museum and Gallery of Fine Arts opened by Rembrandt Peale in 1814. From this artistic beginning in 1833, Miller accepted an offer of financial support and went to Paris to study at L' Ecole des Beaux Arts. Equally instructive were his sketching sessions at the Louvre and Luxembourg Gallery, where he copied Giorgione, Rembrandt, and Salvator Rosa. He also copied works by contemporary romantics J. M. W. Turner and Eugene Delacroix, including the latter's *La Barque De Dante*. From Paris, Miller moved on to Rome, where he again copied old masters and visited the American sculptor Horatio Greenough. Back in America in 1834, Miller moved to New Orleans and, after meeting Stewart, embarked on his western expedition.<sup>9</sup>

#### PICTURES AND PROSE

The confrontation between European aesthetic conventions and documentary facts emerges in different ways in paintings produced by Catlin, Kane, and Miller. Their images, often strikingly similar in theme, express a fascination with the West and its inhabitants and wildlife, and a concern for the Indians and their environment, illustrated by the buffalo hunt, with its allegorical connections between vanishing buffalo and vanishing Indians.<sup>10</sup>

Paul Kane, who depicted the hunt often, wrote at length about his experiences in the



June 1846 hunt conducted by the Métis south of Winnipeg. Entering into the chase, Kane was unhorsed in a fall. He remounted, however, and as he describes it

again joined in the pursuit, and coming up with a large bull, I had the satisfaction of bringing him down at first fire. Excited by my success, I threw down my cap and galloping on, soon put a bullet through another enormous animal. He did not, however, fall, but stopped and faced me, pawing the earth, bellowing and glaring savagely at me. The blood was streaming profusely from his mouth, and I thought he would soon drop. The position in which he stood was so fine that I could not resist the desire of making a sketch. I accordingly dismounted, and had just commenced, when he suddenly made a dash at me. I hardly had time to spring on my horse and get away from him, leaving my gun and

everything behind. (p. 72)

This event and the way it is narrated are strikingly reminiscent of Catlin's account of a similar incident, although Kane's details are more realistic.<sup>11</sup> Despite his firsthand experience, when Kane composed *Assiniboine Hunting Buffalo* (fig. 1) he based it on a print by Bartolomeo Pinelli of two Italian youths chasing a bull, a piece reproduced in a book he owned.<sup>12</sup> In Kane's painting the horses are more delicate of bone and finely bred than one would expect of semiwild plains ponies. Even in action scenes less obviously based on European examples, such as *Half-Breeds Running Buffalo*, Kane tended to position the legs of all the galloping animals in a position virtually identical to the one Pinelli used, because he had difficulty capturing movement. This formula approach is most obvious in *A Buffalo Pound*.

Catlin experienced even more difficulty than Kane in representing realistic movement.



FIG. 1. Paul Kane, *Assiniboine Hunting Buffalo*. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; transferred from Parliament, 1955.



FIG. 2. George Catlin, *Buffalo Chase with Bows and Lances*. *National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr.*

His *Buffalo Chase With Bows and Lances* (fig. 2) of 1832–33 and his later *Chasing the Wild Horse* provide striking examples. For Catlin rejected even the recourse of Kane's European models. Aside from such technical problems, though, the really significant difference between these works of Catlin and of Kane is one of approach. Catlin places his action on a broad ground, a conical hillside or a sweeping plain. Neither the ground nor the sky is emphasized or adds substantially to the mood. Catlin's purpose is to express the excitement of the chase, a theme well executed in his typically swift and spontaneous brush stroke.<sup>13</sup> Kane, conversely, consciously adopts romantic artis-

tic conventions and presents the environment as a vital component, incorporating great banks of stormy clouds, dramatic patches of sunlight, and carefully executed details of flora—all contributing in an important way to the total effect.

Miller's various depictions of the buffalo hunt immediately demonstrate how much more romantic his painting was than either Catlin's or Kane's. In *Killing the Buffalo with the Lance* (fig. 3), a scene very similar to the one Kane depicted in *Assiniboine Hunting Buffalo*, the frenzied circular movement of Indians around the wounded buffalo is reminiscent of Delacroix's paintings of lion hunts. Yet, tech-

nically, Miller is quite academic, showing less freshness and spontaneity than his more famous European exemplar. Miller uses a rapid, feathery stroke for the final detailing of foreground objects, a rather distracting technique. His use of motion is equally effective in depicting the tumult of *Buffalo Rift*, a scene in which hundreds of buffalo are killed by being driven over a cliff. In writing about this watercolor, Miller uncharacteristically slips in a personal, moral comment: "Sometimes it happens that the Indians get entangled and are hurled down with the Buffalo; almost a just retribution for the deplorable waste of animal life."<sup>14</sup>

Miller's use of the plains landscape is, however, less emphatic than either Catlin's or Kane's; indeed, the landscape emerges only occasionally from his work—reflecting, perhaps, both his assigned mission to record the activities on Stewart's trip as well as his own conventional assumptions. But the imaginative tension between Catlin's prose and his

paintings is apparent in Miller's paintings. Miller treats the plains landscape directly, giving it central importance within his composition, only when such a depiction is dictated by his choice of subject. In *Buffalo Turning on His Pursuers*, Miller shows three hunters, two of them dismounted to finish off two wounded buffalo nearby; against the far horizon is the herd from which they have been separated. Because the great distance between foreground and background is characteristic of the buffalo hunt, Miller has to detail the setting. In the notes accompanying two other works, *The Lost "Green-Horn"* and *Prairie Scene: Mirage* (fig. 4), Miller himself suggests how this rationale operated. He recounts an incident in which the party's cook, an Englishman named John, boasted of his great skill as a buffalo hunter; Captain Stewart, upon hearing these boasts, allowed him a chance to go off and make good his claims. The man thereupon got lost for three days, was unable to kill any buffalo he found, and subsisted on berries until he was



FIG. 3. Alfred J. Miller, *Killing Buffalo with The Lance*. Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore.

found by the party's hunters. Inspired by this story, Miller's "Green-Horn" shows a man on a horse standing upon a rise, looking off into the distance, surrounded only by the outspreading plains and sky.<sup>15</sup> In the second painting, Miller depicts a caravan setting out on the prairie and, in the distance, a prairie mirage. In his note he explains:

The caravan is proceeding at its usual steady pace, both men and horses suffering for want of water,—the day is hot and oppressive. Suddenly in the distance, an extensive Lake looms up,—delightful to the eye, the surface reflecting islands, and trees on its borders;—but what is the matter with the horses?—they neither raise their ears, quicken their motion, or snort, as is their wont on such occasions.

Poor brutes!—well do they know there is

no water for them. It is the mirage, an optical delusion;—the deception is so perfect that you can scarcely credit your senses.<sup>16</sup>

Because a prairie mirage requires an uninterrupted line of sight, Miller was forced by his subject to open the whole of his canvas to the landscape. In any case, it is significant that when Miller pictures three other scenes peculiar to the plains—a buffalo "jump," a prairie fire, and a buffalo "surround"—his landscape treatment is similarly direct.

At the same time, however, these subjects also seem to have engendered in Miller an appreciation of the plains landscape in its own right, enforcing its own imaginative adaptation. Thus in his note describing the surround he seems to be suggesting that these subjects owe their impressiveness to the landscape:



FIG. 4. Alfred J. Miller, *Prairie Scene: Mirage*. Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore.





FIG. 5. George Catlin, *Keokuk on Horseback*, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr.

"The dexterity and grace of the Indians and the thousands upon thousands of Buffalo moving in every direction over the illimitable prairie form a scene altogether, that in the whole beside, cannot be matched."<sup>17</sup> Just as other early artists on the plains often needed to see a vast buffalo herd at mating season or a mirage to startle them into an imaginative reaction to the landscape, Alfred Jacob Miller apparently required the same sights to shock him out of his conventional artistic concept of landscape. But while their shock of recognition can be gauged only by the tone and nature of their descriptions, Miller's can be gauged by subtle alterations in composition, for although he repeated the same work on a number of

occasions, he continued to adjust his presentation of landscape throughout his lifetime.<sup>18</sup>

A similar and even more dramatic example of significant variation in these artists' use of atmosphere may be observed in the respective versions of single mounted Indians. In *Keokuk on Horseback* (fig. 5) Catlin depicts his subject sitting astride a bay that looks rather like the horse found in baroque monuments. As the artist tells it, this chief was "excessively vain of his appearance when mounted, and arrayed." His animal—"the finest . . . in the country"—was "beautifully caparisoned," he continues, "and his scalps were carried attached to the bridle-bits" (*Letters and Notes* 2: 150, 212). This vivid description only points up the anomaly

in Catlin's handling. In sharp contrast to the rich panoply of horse and rider, the setting for this "proud and dignified" warrior is a flat, unvaried plain, flooded with bright sunlight. The background, in other words, is greatly underplayed compared to the central subject. In *The Man That Always Rides* (fig. 6) Kane positions his chief somewhat similarly, though at a greater angle riding away from the viewer. Beyond such formal aspects, however, the resemblance ends. Here the white-garbed equestrian sits astride a white stallion, on a sunlit knoll, backlit by the vanishing sun, and dramatically sculptured against a black and stormy sky. In its controlled panache, this work is reminiscent of David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*. Catlin's work is very different. Where Catlin accentuates the Indian and all

his regalia, Kane creates an arresting picture that just happens to be of an Indian.

Miller took yet another approach. In *A Reconnoitre* (fig. 7), which he describes as "a Crow Indian riding to the point of a cliff to examine the prairie," he sees the theme as forming "an extremely picturesque subject, full of wild grace and beauty."<sup>19</sup> The stormy sky and windswept vegetation complement Miller's light and rapid touch, producing a revealingly romantic piece, for, in this late studio work, the Rousseauism increases as the nineteenth century advances. Here, as in his other Indian genre pictures, is a combination of romantic generalities and precise observation of Indian accessories and activities.

These three paintings, and other groupings that might be assembled, are particularly



FIG. 6. Paul Kane, *The Man That Always Rides*. Courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada.



FIG. 7. Alfred J. Miller, *A Reconnoitre*. C-414 Public Archives of Canada.

instructive. Catlin, Kane and Miller—in their mounted Indian images—move progressively away from literal, direct depiction toward more conventionally aesthetic treatment. To be sure, this shift reflects the individual motivation of each artist—Catlin was the person most concerned with recording, with accuracy; Miller the least—and it also reflects, though to a lesser degree, each man's formal training. Generally speaking, as in these three paintings, Catlin's style is the more primitive; Kane's and Miller's, the more conventional. But each figure defines a tension between the need to record and the desire to interpret—with neither requirement gaining ultimate ascendancy.

Catlin and Kane were both well acquainted with contemporary exploration of the West. In full agreement with the usual documentary aims, each artist was determined that his own work should be considered equally factual; each took considerable pains to protect himself against suspicions of invention by having his representations of Indian culture certified as truthful by local white officials, men with positions and qualifications.<sup>20</sup> Hence Catlin and Kane saw themselves at least partly as collectors of facts—indeed, each man was primarily concerned with preserving a record of western Indians before the onslaught of the white man.

Kane's writing, unlike Catlin's exuberant prose, reflects a method of direct documentation. Initially, he was not much taken by the plains landscape. Describing the country around present-day Winnipeg, he writes: "The country here is not very beautiful; a dead level plain with very little timber, the landscape wearing more the appearance of the cultivated farms of the old country with scarcely a stick or stump upon it" (*Paul Kane's Frontier*, p. 68). After growing accustomed to the prairie, however, Kane was more positive. Recording his travels along the banks of the North Saskatchewan River, heading toward present-day Edmonton, he writes: "It was the commencement of Indian summer; the evening was very fine, and threw that peculiar soft,

warm haziness over the landscape, which is supposed to proceed from the burning of the immense prairies. The sleepy buffaloes grazing upon the undulating hills, here and there relieved by clumps of small trees, the unbroken stillness, and the approaching evening, rendered it altogether a scene of most enchanting repose" (p. 80). Kane proceeds here in the same painterly manner as Catlin, presenting the scene as if he were describing a picture.<sup>21</sup> First, he is concerned with the visual nature of the scene, then he turns to its component parts (buffalo, hills, and trees), and only then does he evaluate it subjectively. Kane was especially conscious of the wild prairie flowers, and he often included them as details in his pictures; *Camping on the Prairies* features a foreground of wild roses. The presence of flowers also led Kane to describe the prairie as "presenting more the aspect of a garden than of uncultivated land" (p. 81).

Miller's purpose in painting was quite different from either Catlin's or Kane's. He had no documentary aim because his patron, William Drummond Stewart, a romantic who had fought at Waterloo, saw his western trips as exotic adventures, full of Indian maidens, buffalo hunts, and feats of horsemanship. Stewart was not interested in a literal view of the West, preferring to see the Indian as a mysterious figure, wild and unpredictable, yet noble in his natural freedom. He assigned this romantic view to Miller, and it suited him well. In a letter to Brantz Mayer written before departing from St. Louis, Miller explained his own attitude: "It's best never to be too explicit (I have found in painting that whenever I left anything for the imagination to fill up, that it invariably did me more justice)." Stewart concurred, for he admired an early work of Miller's in which the sun was "throwing a mysterious haze over every object." Miller recognized the basis for the praise, recording in his journal that "this mistiness was pleasing to the observer [Stewart] because it leaves his imagination at full play."<sup>22</sup>

Although neither Catlin nor Kane sought such romantic room in painting imaginative



wonders, neither was willing to restrict himself to copying faithfully from nature; both recognized the limitations of reproduction and sought to create works of art not bound to specific observed facts. Notwithstanding their endorsement of its general aims and methods, both had difficulty accepting the limitations of Baconian empiricism, which denied the validity of speculation beyond conclusions observable in finite factual observation. Both transformed their source material to create aesthetically satisfying works. In Kane's case the process of transformation was clearly visible: his field sketches are usually "accurate," spontaneous, and bright; his canvases, completed in the studio, are more often "aesthetic," composed, and mannered. Kane was the recorder in the field and the artist in the studio. He seemed content to concentrate on the mirror—to "imitate"—when sketching, but felt the need to be a lamp—to "create"—when working up his canvases. With Catlin, however, the case is significantly different. Despite his assertion that his paintings were "unstudied . . . as works of art," he did edit and change the poses of his figures, often to emulate classical sources; at the same time the modeling and paint application is much more carefully executed in some pieces than in others.<sup>23</sup> There is far less distinction between strictly documentary work and work with specifically aesthetic aims than is evident in the Canadian's oeuvre. Catlin viewed at least some of his field studies as finished products, easily accepting the validity of a rapidly executed piece, whereas Kane never confused the two types of production. Not encumbered by much formal art training, Catlin perhaps did not feel the weight of tradition which dictated that a worthy painting is the result of numerous preparatory sketches followed by months of labor in the studio. Although he did "work up" some of his sketches, he also showed his field studies as finished works, thereby creating an ambivalence that Kane avoided.

Kane's practice may easily be inferred from a comparison of the sketch of *Kee-akee-Ka-Saa-*

*Ka-Wow*, "The Man That Gives The War Whoop," (fig. 8) and the final portrait labeled *Kee-A-Kee-Ka-Sa-Coo-Way* (fig. 9). In a manner typical of Kane's field sketches, the watercolor study clearly concentrates on the subject's bold, strong face, adding only the merest suggestion of a bare torso and ornamented wolf skin thrown over his left shoulder. The feeling of wily determination that permeates the sketch tallies closely with Kane's description in *Wanderings of an Artist*.<sup>24</sup> The canvas, in contrast, is a polished amalgamation of the portrait study and some additional props, in particular a fine eagle-head pipe-stem and decorated jacket. Between the preliminary and final stages, therefore, quite considerable changes have been made not only in presentation but also in general effect. The subject is no longer a rough, determined warrior but a groomed and contemplative chief. Keenly aware of the sensitivities of his white audience and knowing their Victorian preference for unusual, embellished clothing on a "noble" bearer, rather than the crude reality of quotidian "savage" life, the artist had induced his subject to change his everyday wear for ceremonial garb by telling him that "the picture would be shown to the Queen" (p. 144).<sup>25</sup>

Kane's implicit distinction between accuracy and artistry is somewhat akin to the distinction commonly made during his day between metaphysical speculation and the more practical applications of science. Especially during the 1840s and 1850s, science, though generally conceived as rationalistic and empirical, was not divorced from religious assumptions. Indeed, science, properly conducted, was seen as confirming Christian Revelation.<sup>26</sup> From this perspective, Paul Kane's practice as a part-time Baconian empiricist was requisite. Unmodified by aesthetic judgment, Kane's finished works would be deficient not only as art, but as factual documents as well. Kane, the romantic, certainly aimed in his finished canvases to permeate beyond the appearances of nature to a more transcendental truth.



FIG. 8. Paul Kane, Kee-akee-Ka-Saa-Ka-Wow, *The Man That Gives The War Whoop* (Cree Indian), Fort Pitt, Alberta. C-114386 Public Archives of Canada.



FIG. 9. Paul Kane, Kee-A-Kee-Ka-Sa-Coo-Way. Courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada.

George Catlin was not as successful as Kane in achieving this delicate mixture of factual truth and aesthetic worth, partly because he did not make Kane's distinction between sketches and studio paintings. By combining diverse kinds of material, he was forced continually to compromise between the demands of documentation and of art—although it is very doubtful that he would have seen his situation in quite this way. Critics inevitably found him lacking in one respect or the other and also doubted his pictorial accuracy. On a steamboat voyage up the Mississippi in 1843, Audubon noted in his diary: "Oh! Mr. Catlin, I am sorry now to see and to read your accounts of the Indians you saw—how very different they must have been from any that I have seen! We saw no 'carpeted prairies,' no 'velvety distant landscape;' and if these things are to be seen, why, the sooner we reach them the better." In fact, much of

Audubon's commentary seems designed to impugn Catlin's impressions. At one point he notes that Mandan huts (which he saw after the tribe was all but wiped out by smallpox) "are very far from looking poetical." Audubon also pointedly refers to "this wild and, to my eyes, miserable country, the poetry of which lies in the imagination of these writers who have described the 'velvety prairies' and 'enchanted castles' (of mud), so common where we now are." As his final thrust at Catlin, Audubon writes, "We have seen much remarkably handsome scenery, but nothing at all comparing with Catlin's descriptions; his book must, after all, be altogether a humbug. Poor devil! I pity him from the bottom of my soul."<sup>27</sup> However much prompted by jealousy—and one of his editors thinks a very great deal—Audubon arrived at some truth in his estimation that Catlin's enthusiasm for the landscape owed something to the fact he associated it

with the Indians.<sup>28</sup> In that sense, then, the "poetry" of the plains landscape did lie within Catlin's "imagination."

Such scepticism as Audubon's was not unfounded. We have already noted Catlin's romantic literary interpretation. Like Kane, Catlin in his paintings added pipe stems, weapons, and clothing to portraits worked up in the studio. The artist admitted, as well, that he sometimes excluded "such trappings and ornaments as interfered with the grace and simplicity of the figure."<sup>29</sup> Justified or not, doubts about his veracity greatly affected Catlin, with his expressed passion for factual material.

Catlin's problems with critics did not stop here. Even more than his accuracy, his artistry was often called into question. Another Indian painter, Seth Eastman, when asked to compare John Mix Stanley's paintings to Catlin's, replied to Stanley, "It affords me pleasure to say that I consider the artistic merits of yours far superior to Mr. Catlin's; and that they give a better idea of the Indian than any works in Mr. Catlin's collection." Such an opinion was not limited to his critics, either.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, only Baudelaire among contemporary commentators challenged the prevailing opinion on the quality of Catlin's work—and his comments reveal as much about the generally negative response as about his own positive one:

When M. Catlin came to Paris . . . the word went around that he could neither paint nor draw, and if he had produced some tolerable studies, it was thanks only to his courage and his patience . . . Today it is established that M. Catlin can paint and draw very well indeed . . . M. Catlin has captured the noble expression of these splendid fellows in a masterly way.<sup>31</sup>

One work by Catlin that Baudelaire particularly admired was *Buffalo Bull's Back Fat, Head Chief, Blood Tribe* (fig. 10).

It must be remembered that Catlin had

virtually no formal art training whereas Kane and Miller did, both at home and abroad. On the other hand, Catlin did have considerable opportunity to view painting produced and exhibited in Philadelphia and New York and could easily have acquired knowledge of European techniques and American tastes in that way. Catlin, however, does not seem to have hankered after European techniques or tradition-bound academy recognition at all. On the contrary, he described himself as taking "an indescribable pleasure in roaming through Nature's trackless wilds, and selecting my models, where I am free and unshackled by the killing restraints of society; where a painter must modestly sit and breathe away in agony the edge and soul of his inspiration, waiting for the sluggish calls of the civil" (*Letters and Notes* 2: 37). Ever the zealous romantic, he drew his inspiration from nature, not from art, like Thomas Cole claiming for himself a classical precedent. "I have for a long time been of the opinion," Catlin explained on one occasion, "that the wilderness of our country affords models equal to those from which the Grecian sculptors transferred to the marble such inimitable grace and beauty" (1:15). Later he was even more explicit: "Of this much I am certain—that amongst these sons of the forest . . . I have learned more of the essential parts of my art in the last three years, than I could have learned in New York in a life-time" (2:37).

Catlin's oeuvre is difficult to compare to Kane's because Catlin's is so uneven. After his first year in the field, 1830, when he was clearly learning how to control his materials, he could usually create a sensitive and noteworthy work if he had the time and interest. Unfortunately, so many Indians wanted to have their image taken, and there was so much protocol involved in the process, that the artist was forced to keep up a pace quite incompatible with careful work. His best, nevertheless, is impressive. In his most successful paintings he boldly laid down his prime forms in a limited palette,



FIG. 10. George Catlin, *Buffalo Bull's Back Fat, Head Chief, Blood Tribe*. *National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*. Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr.

modeled the central figure, and added relevant details.<sup>32</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Paul Kane is in many respects a mirror image of George Catlin, and they are brought into sharper focus by Alfred Jacob Miller. While Catlin's romanticism is more apparent in his prose—often purple prose—Kane's painting is far more romantic than his writings. *Wanderings of an Artist* displays the same descriptive, matter-of-fact perspective that characterizes Kane's on-the-spot sketches. Only when he was away from his subject in his studio did Kane, like Catlin, depart from his documentary perspective and imbue his canvases with the European conventions demanded by his audience and training. Catlin's pace was frenzied; paintings were done on the spot with backgrounds and other detail left until later, and it is often difficult to separate inspiration from artifice. Only his writings reveal his romantic predilections. With Kane, the initial impression is readily separable from the subsequent artifice; though he had seen the West as it was, he tried after the fact to make that landscape and its peoples fit a conventional, preconceived idea of what constitutes "profound" art.

Alfred Jacob Miller's role in this trio of Great Plains artists is pivotal—his training and experience before heading west schooled him in European artistic conventions, but unlike Catlin and Kane, he had no factual or personal ax to grind. Because Miller cared little for recording accurately and romanticized according to the dictates of his aesthetic, leaving room "for the imagination to fill up," he serves as a gloss on Catlin and Kane. His works—academic and romantic as they are—nevertheless reveal the same need to adjust the requirements of artistic convention to the depiction of a new land and its peoples. That Catlin and Kane—as self-appointed artistic pathfinders—reveal a tension between reality and convention, between the mirror and the lamp, is not surprising. Though they tried,

they could not record and interpret at once, and so had to choose one or the other. Catlin records far more in his pictures, interprets in his prose; Kane, conversely, records in his prose, interprets in his pictures. Thus, that Alfred Jacob Miller was unable to maintain his European artistic conventions in facing the Great Plains is crucial; he adapted his landscapes and, to a lesser degree, his portraits and his written commentary on his paintings to the plains. Despite his disinterested motivation, by so doing Miller confirms and underscores the common tension produced by representing the new land, a tension more ambiguous in the works of Catlin and Kane, owing to their competing motives. Catlin, Kane, and Miller, therefore, form a trio of plains artists whose works on the Great Plains during the first half of the nineteenth century define an imaginative confrontation between the new land and the old-world aesthetic they brought with them. In pictures and prose, they articulate an aesthetic change wrought by that new land—the Great Plains.

### NOTES

1. The effect of the Great Plains on its artists—Catlin, Miller, Karl Bodmer and others—has been of recurrent interest since Bernard DeVoto published *Across the Wide Missouri* (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1947). More recently, in an essay in *The West as Romantic Horizon*, William H. Goetzmann has described the artists as a group (Omaha: Center for Western Studies, Joslyn Art Museum, 1981) p. 12.

In addition to Goetzmann's book, other recent scholarship reflects major interest in this subject. See literary and cultural studies such as Stephen Fender, *Plotting the Golden West: American Literature and the Rhetoric of the California Trail* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) and Lee Clark Mitchell, *Witness to a Vanishing America: The Nineteenth-Century Response* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); a work that is quite complementary to our own is Dawn Glanz, *How the West Was Drawn: American Art and the Settling of the Frontier* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982).

Some of the material on Kane and Catlin used here appears in a slightly different form in Ann Davis, *A Distant Harmony: Comparisons Between the Painting of Canada and the United States of America*,

exhibition catalog, Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1982.

2. M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953).

3. DeVoto makes the point that through *Letters and Notes* and *North American Indian Portfolio* (1844), as well as through his Indian gallery, which was widely seen throughout the United States and England, Catlin established "the first set of conventions of Western painting" (DeVoto, p. 392).

4. William H. Truettner, *The Natural Man Observed: A Study of Catlin's Indian Gallery* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979), pp. 12, 82. See also Ellwood Perry, *The Image of the Indian and the Black Man in American Art, 1590-1900* (New York: George Braziller, 1974).

5. George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians*, 2 vols. (1841; rpt. New York: Dover, 1973), 1:1. Subsequent quotations from this edition are given parenthetically in the text.

6. For a discussion of the effect of plains landscape on non-artistic travelers who preceded Catlin, see Robert Thacker, "The Plains Landscape and Descriptive Technique," *Great Plains Quarterly* 2 (Summer 1982): 146-56.

7. See for example *Letters and Notes*, 1:15.

8. Introduction, *Paul Kane's Frontier*, J. Russell Harper, ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), pp. 11-13, 51. Subsequent quotations from Kane's *Wanderings of an Artist Among The Indians of North America from Canada to Vancouver's Island and Oregon through the Hudson's Bay Territory and Back Again* (London, 1859) are from the edition reprinted in *Paul Kane's Frontier* and are given parenthetically in the text. The volume also includes a Catalogue Raisonné of Kane's work.

9. James Thomas Flexner, *That Wilder Image: The Painting of America's Native School from Thomas Cole to Winslow Homer* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1962), p. 91; *The West of Alfred Jacob Miller*, ed. Marvin C. Ross, rev. ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), pp. 9-10, 48-49. Hereafter abbreviated *West of AJM*. Miller has just received major treatment in a work that supercedes Ross's: *Alfred Jacob Miller: Artist on the Oregon Trail*, ed. Ron Tyler (Fort Worth, Texas: Amon Carter Museum, 1982).

10. See Rena N. Coen, "The Last of the Buffalo," *American Art Journal* 5 (November 1973): 83-94.

11. Catlin describes a similar incident in *Letters and Notes*, 1:24.

12. In *Nuova Raccolta di Cinquanta Costumi Pittoreschi Incisi All'acqua Forte da Bartolomeo Pinelli* (Rome, 1816), listed in Kane's estate in Surrogate Court Office.

13. Yet Catlin also recognized that both the buffalo and the Indian's way of life were doomed to extinction. See *Letters and Notes*, 1: 292-93, and Coen, "Last of the Buffalo," p. 88.

14. *Braves and Buffalo: Plains Life in 1837*, ed. Michael Bell (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), p. 22.

15. In the painting Miller places his mounted "Green-Horn" against a large cloudbank overhanging the plains, using a convention employed in his portrait of Ba-da-ah-chon-du, the Crow chief. In both cases this device lessens the viewer's sense of the vast distance behind the central figure.

16. *West of AJM*, note facing plate 149.

17. *Ibid.*, note facing plate 200.

18. See for example:

<i>The West of AJM</i> (plate number)		<i>Braves and Buffalo</i> (page number)
76	<i>Pawnee Indians on Warpath</i>	149
84	<i>Approaching Buffalo</i>	145
106	<i>Approaching the Buffalo</i>	19
117	<i>Medicine Circles</i>	77
142	<i>Breaking Camp at Sunrise</i>	121
151	<i>Yell of Triumph</i>	133
190	<i>Buffalo Rift</i>	23
198	<i>Prairie on Fire</i>	41
200	<i>A "Surround"</i>	160

19. *Braves and Buffalo*, p. 68.

20. See for instance, George Catlin, *Ok-kee-pa, A Religious Ceremony and Other Customs of the Mandans by George Catlin* (1867; rpt. ed. John C. Ewers, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 87. Kane Family Papers, James Douglas, 30 June, 1847. See also William McBean, 30 July, 1847; John Lee Lewes, 16 September 1847, rpt. in *Paul Kane's Frontier*, pp. 328-29.

21. See, for example, Catlin's description in *Letters and Notes*, 1:18 and 2:20-21.

22. Quoted by Carol Clark, "A Romantic Painter in the American West," in *Alfred Jacob Miller: Artist on the Oregon Trail*, pp. 51-52.

23. See Catlin's *Letters and Notes*, 1:147.

24. Kane, *Paul Kane's Frontier*, p. 144.

25. For a discussion of Paul Kane's two styles, see Davis, *Distant Harmony*, pp. 58-59.

26. See A. B. McKillop, *A Disciplined Intelligence: Critical Inquiry and Canadian Thought in the Victorian Era* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979), pp. 115-32.

27. *Audubon's America: The Narratives and Experiences of John James Audubon*, ed. Donald Culross Peattie (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1940), pp. 282, 292, 294, 298.

28. Donald Culross Peattie, intro. to "Up the Missouri," in *Audubon's America*, p. 275. Peattie here concludes that Audubon was professionally jealous because Catlin saw the plains first.

29. *Letters and Notes*, 1:147.

30. W. Vernon Kinitz, *John Mix Stanley* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1942), p. 17; *Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution*, 1871, pp. 40-41. J. Russell Harper, in *Painting in Canada: A History*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), p. 121, felt that Catlin's and Stanley's works were of "like inspiration" to Kane.

31. Baudelaire, *Salon de 1846* (Paris, 1846), as quoted by Hugh Honour, *The New Golden Land:*

*European Images of America from the Discoveries to the Present Time* (New York: Random House, 1975), p. 238; see also Robert N. Beeton, "George Catlin in France: His Relationship to Delacroix and Baudelaire," *Art Quarterly* 24 (1961): 129-44.

32. A particularly strong example is *Buffalo Bull's Back Fat, Head Chief, Blood Tribe*, a piece that obviously appealed to Catlin since he submitted it to the 1846 Salon in Paris where it impressed Baudelaire—the poet praised the primitive strength of Catlin's reds and greens (*Letters and Notes* 1:191). For a comparison of this piece to Kane's *Kee-akee-Ka-Saa-Ka-Wow*, "The Man that Gives the War Whoop" (fig. 9), see Davis, p. 61.