

Discussion Guide and Activities  
*Painting the Wild Frontier: The Art and Adventures of George Catlin*  
by Susanna Reich

Subject Headings & Major Themes

American History  
Visual Art and Artists  
Native Americans  
Biography

Discussion Guide

1. How did George Catlin's childhood influence his life?
2. Why do you think George became an artist? Could someone become an artist in the same way today?
3. Why did George decide to paint Indians?
4. Why did George begin his western adventures in St. Louis?
5. What kinds of transportation did George use?
5. Describe some of George's painting materials and techniques. What other kinds of painting materials do artists use?
6. Why did some Indians consider George a medicine man?
7. Should George have painted a dying buffalo? Should he have visited the pipestone quarry?
8. What was unusual about the "Indian Gallery"? Why was it popular?
9. Was it a good idea to hire Indians to perform in the Indian Gallery?
10. Should George have gone back to the United States sooner?
11. Why do you think George returned to South America several times? Did he find what he was looking for?
12. What do you think George liked best about traveling to so many different places?
13. Was George a "friend of the Indians," as he claimed? Did he exploit the Indians?
14. Were you surprised that George was out of touch with his daughters for so long?
15. Why was George's work unpopular at the end of his life? Do you prefer portrait paintings, landscapes, or some other type of subject matter? Why?
16. What made George's paintings unique? Choose another 19th-century artist and compare that artist's work to George's.
17. If you were an Indian, would you have wanted George to paint your picture?
18. What makes this book nonfiction? What kind of research sources did the author use?
19. Choose a Catlin painting that appears in black and white in the book. Find a color version online and compare the two versions. (See online resources below.)
20. What did you learn about Native Americans from reading this book? What did you learn about artists?

Activities

1. While visiting Indian tribes along the Missouri River in 1832, George created more than 100 paintings in about six months. Though many were unfinished, he managed to capture enough details on his canvases that he could finish them in his studio after he returned home. How did he work so fast? Try creating some quick sketches of people and places. Experiment with different media such as pencil, pen, crayon, markers, charcoal, pastel, and paint. Time yourself. What can you capture in 10 seconds? A minute? Ten minutes? An hour?

2. George Catlin began his artistic career by painting miniature portraits (about 3" square) on pieces of ivory, like the one on page 13 of *Painting the Wild Frontier*. Can you draw or paint a miniature portrait of a friend or family member? What important details make one person's face different from another's?

3. According to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, there are approximately 1.7 million American Indians and Alaska Natives living in the United States today. What Indian tribes are native to your state or county? How were their cultures similar to or different from the tribes described in *Painting the Wild Frontier*, and what is their status today? Are their languages still spoken? Many tribes have web sites that can provide information not only on tribal history, but on current political and social concerns.

4. In the 1830's, George Catlin made five separate trips west of the Mississippi and wrote letters about his travels that were published in newspapers. Compare the map on page 58 of *Painting the Wild Frontier* with a modern-day map. How do they differ? What modern-day cities and states did he visit? Create a map of a trip you have taken. Write a letter about the trip, illustrated with drawings or paintings of the people and places you saw.

#### Online Resources

"Campfire Stories with George Catlin: An Encounter with Two Cultures." The Smithsonian American Art Museum.

<http://catlinclassroom.si.edu>

"George Catlin," by Donna Mann. National Gallery of Art.

<http://www.ibiblio.org/nga/catlin.html>

George Catlin's Indian Gallery. The Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian.

<http://www.nmai.si.edu/exhibitions/catlin/index.htm>

"George Catlin's Obsession," by Bruce Watson. *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 1, 2002.

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/catlin.html>

"George Catlin, The Medicine Painter." Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

<http://www.vmfa.state.va.us/catlin/catlin.html>

"Medicine Painter: George Catlin on the Upper Missouri, 1832," by Alice M. Cornell.

University of Cincinnati Digital Press.

<http://www.ucdp.uc.edu/exhibits/catlin/catweb.html>

The National Gallery of Art. 350 Catlin works created from the 1850s on.

<http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/psearch?Request=A&Person=4950>

The Smithsonian American Art Museum. 627 works of art by Catlin from the 1830s.

<http://americanart.si.edu>

This discussion guide was prepared by Susanna Reich. Copyright © 2008. All rights reserved. Commercial use or publication of text is prohibited.