

Ba-da-ah-chon-du (He Who Outjumps All), a Crow Chief on Horseback



Ba-da-ah-chon-du (He Who Outjumps All), a Crow Chief on Horseback, ca. 1856–70

George Catlin (American, 1796–1872)

Oil on canvas, 21³/₈ x 26³/₄ in.

Paul Mellon Collection, 85.609

Object and Artist Information

George Catlin traveled the North American continent from 1830 to 1838 chronicling native people and their ways of life in paintings and prints. His adventures resulted in more than six hundred portraits and scenes of rituals, hunting, and daily life from more than fifty Native American groups.

Born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, Catlin grew up on a farm on the Susquehanna River in Broome County, New York. His mother and grandfather fought Native Americans and survived the Wyoming Valley Massacre of 1773. Catlin's mother was briefly held captive by the Iroquois. Catlin, however, had little experience with Native Americans in his youth. He became acquainted with an Oneida man, named On-O-Gong-Wa (Great Warrior), who camped for a while on the Catlin family farm.

Catlin's interest in Native Americans grew from a chance encounter in Philadelphia. They were traveling to Washington, D.C., as an official delegation, and the artist was impressed by their dignified presence. He resolved to dedicate himself to documenting the lives of Native Americans in their homelands.

Over a period of six years Catlin visited many tribes in hopes "of reaching ultimately, every tribe of Indians on the Continent of North America, and of bringing home faithful portraits of their principal personages, . . . views of their villages, games and full notes on their character and history." His travels to the Indian homelands coincided with the movement of Native Americans to reservations mandated by the U.S. Indian Removal Act of 1830. Catlin's works are among the final documentation of many tribes in their native lands.

To raise public awareness of these endangered cultures and to help underwrite his own expenses, he created "Catlin's Indian Gallery," which contained his paintings and artifacts from his travels. The gallery opened in New York in 1838, toured Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Boston for a year, and then went to Europe. Catlin also became a noted author and lecturer on Native Americans.

Unfortunately, Catlin lost his traveling show to creditors in 1852 and spent time in a debtors' prison in England. He and his collection were rescued by Philadelphia industrialist Joseph Harrison, who paid Catlin's debts in exchange for the contents of the gallery.

In 1853 Catlin began another series of journeys that took him to South America and the West Coast of the United States. After seven years of travel, he spent the next decade painting in his studio. From 1871 until his death the following year, Catlin exhibited those works in New York and at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

While touring the U.S. Midwest, Catlin was a guest of the Crow and the Minnetaree on the upper Missouri River. He marveled at their extraordinary feats of horsemanship on the plains of present-day North Dakota. Describing this painting of a Crow chief, Catlin wrote:

I have painted him as he sat for me, balanced on his leaping wild horse with his shield and quiver slung on his back, and his long lance decorated with the eagle's quills, trailed in his right hand. His shirt and his leggings, and moccasins, were of the mountain-goat skins . . . their seams everywhere fringed with a profusion of scalp-locks taken from the heads of his enemies slain in battle. His long hair, which reached almost to the ground whilst he was standing on his feet, was now lifted in the air and floating in black waves over the hips of his leaping charger. On his head, and over his shining black locks, he wore a magnificent crest or head-dress, made of the quills of the war-eagle and ermine skins; and on his horse's head also was another of equal beauty and precisely the same in pattern and material. Added to these ornaments there were yet as many others which contributed to his picturesque appearance, and amongst them a beautiful netting of various colours, that completely covered and almost obscured the horse's head and neck, and extended over its back and its hips, terminating in a most extravagant and magnificent crupper, embossed and fringed with rows of beautiful shells and porcupine quills of various colours. (Catlin, *Letters and Notes*, vol. 1, letter 24)

Concept

Today George Catlin is remembered for humanizing his subjects as well as recording the details of their appearance, customs, and activities in his paintings. He is considered a pioneer in the field of ethnography, the study of specific cultures. Catlin's paintings, writings, and explorations serve as a springboard for a wide variety of art, history, and social-studies projects. And his unique perspective allows us to better understand the diversity of Native American cultures.

Observation and Discussion

Use the following suggested questions and discussion points while looking at *Ba-da-ah-chon-du*.

- George Catlin was an artist who traveled across the American West painting, drawing, and writing about the life and culture of Native Americans.
- Trace Catlin’s travels across the American West.
- See what Catlin saw by looking at his many paintings.
- Explore how each Native American tribe has its own unique culture.
- Examine the chief and what he is wearing. How does what the horse is wearing compare? Why do you think they are dressed the same?
- Do you think the horse and rider could have held this pose long enough for Catlin to paint them?

Resources for Grades K–2

Activities

ACTIVITY 1 **My Map**

Have students make a map of their own travels. Whether they have ventured only as far as their school or around their neighborhood or city, instruct them to mark these destinations on a map. Enrichments: Add to the adventure by having them compose a short journal entry describing a trip or compare modern modes of travel to those of Catlin’s time (canoe, horseback, steam boat).

ACTIVITY 2 **Moccasins**

A moccasin is a tanned-leather shoe sewn in a slipper shape. Although clothing among traditional Native Americans varied from tribe to tribe, most of them wore this type of foot covering. Ask adult volunteer helpers to cut a pair of brown-paper moccasins for each child. For moccasin pattern and instructions, visit:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/museum/teachers/material/trail/indians/moccasin.htm>.

In the image, Ba-da-ah-chon-du is wearing moccasins. He is a Crow chief, and the Crow Nation is one of the Plains tribes. Encourage the students to add decorations and symbols that are specific to the Plains people (please do not use generic Native American symbols):

<http://www.manataka.org/page31.html>.

Closure

Encourage the students to share their ideas about what they produced.

SOLs

English K.2, K.3, 1.1, 1.2, 2.2

History K.2, K.3, K.4, 1.1, 1.4, 1.5, 1.6, 1.12, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.6, 2.12

Math K.11, 1.17

Science K.1, K.4, 1.1, 1.5, 1.7, 1.8, 2.1

Visual Arts K.2, K.3, K.4, K.5, K.13, 1.5, 1.6, 1.7, 1.8, 1.12, 1.14, 2.4, 2.5, 2.9, 2.13, 2.14, 2.15

Observation and Discussion

Use the following suggested questions and discussion points while looking at *Ba-da-ah-chon-du*.

- Catlin was an explorer, historian, artist, writer, reporter, anthropologist, geologist, and trailblazer. Research and discuss how each of these words describes Catlin.
- Someone sitting for a portrait (school picture, family painting, etc.) usually selects his or her own clothing, hairstyle, and personal adornment. Show students several portraits from different times, places, and cultures and ask them to discuss the meaning and significance of the objects and symbols in each image (for example: keys hanging from a belt suggests the wearer has authority and responsibility; books on the table indicate that the person is educated; precious jewelry shows wealth).
- How have Native American environments, dress, and ways of life changed since Catlin saw the people, places, and things in the American West in the 1830s? How is life the same?

Resources for Grades 3–5

Activities

ACTIVITY 1 **Mini Portraits**

Clothing, hairstyles, and personal adornments are highly important in all cultures. These features help identify various characteristics, special abilities, and outstanding achievements of the wearer. Engage students in a discussion about elements in the Crow chief portrait that reflect leadership and power.

Before the invention and proliferation of photography, artists created visual documentation of people, places, and historic events through paintings, drawings, and sculpture. Miniature portraits, small paintings usually produced on a three-inch piece of ivory, were commissioned as keepsakes similar to today's wallet-size photographs. Have students try their own hand at this technique, which was popular in George Catlin's era, by creating small, formal portraits of someone they know. If painting small is a challenge, try painting the portraits on a piece of "Shrinky Dink" plastic, which will miniaturize upon baking.

ACTIVITY 2 **Stop horsing around and let's do some research!**

Horses were not introduced to Native Americans until the sixteenth century. They had no word for this new animal in their vocabulary, so they called them "big dogs." Continue your research to discover who brought horses to Native Americans. Have students write a paragraph about how they imagine horses were introduced to the Plains Indians and how it changed their way of life.

Closure

Encourage the students to share their ideas about what they produced.

SOLs

English 3.9, 4.7, 5.8

History 3.12, VS.1, USI.1, USI.2, USI.3, USI.4, USI.8

Science 3.6, 3.10, 4.5

Visual Arts 3.2, 3.13, 3.22, 3.2, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.7, 4.22, 5.1, 5.2, 5.18, 5.20, 5.23

Educational Media Resources

Recommended Films, Videos, and DVDs

Frontier Visionary: George Catlin and the Plains Indians

ED 483

27 min. | 2002 | VHS | Smithsonian American Art Museum

Native American Architecture

ED-484

20 min. | 1996 | VHS | Richard Byrnes

Of Natural Liberty and Independence: George Catlin's Portraits of Native Americans

GA-93

Nine-panel educational exhibition, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Discover Native American Culture

PS-121

This kit contains an in-depth teachers' guide with hands-on activities for K-12 and selected Native American objects created by craftspeople from groups along Catlin's original trail. It also includes animal furs, trade cloth, and other period European objects, storybooks, photographs, a video, and a CD (Virginia Museum of Fine Arts).

Note: These and other audiovisual resources related to VMFA's collection may be accessed through our website:

http://www.vmfa.museum/Learn/Statewide_Programs/Films,_Videos,_and_DVDs.aspx

Educational Media Resources

Recommended Websites

<http://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/online/catlin/>

<http://www.nga.gov/kids/catlin/catlin1.htm>

<http://www.nmai.si.edu/>

http://www.bigorrin.org/crow_kids.htm

Recommended Reading

Plain, Nancy. *The Man Who Painted Indians*. New York: Benchmark Books, 1997.

Reich, Susanna, *Painting the Wild Frontier: The Art and Adventures of George Catlin*, New York, Clarion Books, 2008.

Link to Related Works of Art at VMFA

<http://www.vmfa.museum/Collections/AncientAmerican/>

Links to Related Programs

Teen classes

<http://www.vmfa.museum/Learn/Teens/Teens.aspx>

Families and kids

http://www.vmfa.museum/Learn/Kids+_Families/Kids+_Families.aspx

Tours

<http://www.vmfa.museum/Learn/Educators/educators.aspx>

Teacher workshops

http://www.vmfa.museum/Learn/Educators/Teacher_Workshops/Teacher_Workshops.aspx

Please check <http://www.vmfa.museum/Learn/> regularly to learn about new tours and other educational opportunities.



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