

Briscoe Western Art Museum to exhibit rare images of American Indians

By Elda Silva | June 21, 2017



Photo: Courtesy Of The Briscoe Western Art Museum

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George Catlin's "Buffalo Hunt Chase" is part of a rare set of prints that will be exhibited at the Briscoe Western Art Museum.

From 1832 to 1837, George Catlin spent the summer months sketching the American Indian tribes of the Great Plains.

The Pennsylvania-born painter and writer's goal was to capture the essence of American Indian life before it vanished. Ultimately, Catlin produced about 600 oil paintings of tribes including the Mandan, Lakota, Blackfeet and Crow based on the drawings and field notes he collected.

In addition to paintings, Catlin made hand-tinted lithographic prints to sell to wealthy customers. A rare deluxe set of his “North American Indian Portfolio” will be on display at the Briscoe Western Art Museum starting Friday. Issued by London-based publishers Chatto & Windus in 1875, the edition of 31 color plates is one of only three known sets still in existence.

“(Catlin) used some terminology like ‘noble savage,’ for example, that wouldn’t play very well today, but in general his goal and his desire was to be documentary and to really capture what people looked like and the activities they participated in before the era was gone forever,” said Michael Duchemin, president and CEO of the Briscoe. “Historically, Catlin is thought to be someone who re-created those images faithfully.”

In addition to publishing the portfolio, Catlin also toured the United States and Europe, exhibiting his work with examples of American Indian arts and crafts. Catlin was accompanied by representative members of Indian tribes who enacted dances and other scenes. The show was “kind of a precursor to Buffalo Bill’s Wild West (show) which travels in the late 19th century,” Duchemin said

Unfortunately, Catlin was not as good a businessman as he was an artist. He eventually lost his collection. In his later years, the artist traveled to South and Central America to document the indigenous people of those regions.

The lithographs in the collection on view at the Briscoe include portraits and scenes of activities such as hunting and dancing. One of Catlin’s best known works is his depiction of the Assiniboine chief Wi-jún-jon “going to Washington and returning home.” In the split image, the American Indian leader is shown in traditional dress, then — newly assimilated into white culture — wearing a top hat and blue suit with golden epaulets on his shoulders, a sword in a scabbard at his waist and a shade umbrella in one white gloved hand and a souvenir folding hand fan in the other.

“Catlin knew it was only a matter of time before the populations of the United States kind of carried forward across the continent, and when that happened the lifeways of the people who lived in the western states were going to be lost forever,” Duchemin said. “So he dedicated himself to documenting that scene before the end was near. Terms like ‘vanishing race’ and that type of terminology from that era is really attributed back to Catlin’s work.”

“Catlin’s North American Indian Portfolio” will be on view from Friday through Sept. 4 at the Briscoe Western Art Museum, 210 W. Market St., 210-229-4499, briscoemuseum.org. Free with museum admission.

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