

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART IN WASHINGTON LENDS CATLIN PAINTINGS

OF SOUTH AMERICA FOR 1989 LATIN AMERICAN TOUR

WASHINGTON, D.C., June 7, 1989 -- The National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. is lending thirty-five paintings of South American Indian subjects by nineteenth-century U.S. artist George Catlin to the Museo Franz Mayer in Mexico City, Mexico; the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires, Argentina; and the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Santiago, Chile. The Latin American tour of South America: Paintings by George Catlin, which will take place June through December 1989, is a cultural presentation of the United States Information Agency.

"Catlin's fascinating paintings of South American Indian culture provide an important record of nineteenth-century tribal life which has changed greatly or, in some cases, vanished. It is our hope that Catlin's enthusiasm for his subject, so evident in this exhibition, will reinforce the longstanding friendships between the peoples of Latin America and the U.S.," said J. Carter Brown, director of the National Gallery of Art. Brown spoke at the opening of the exhibition in Mexico on May 29.

George Catlin, born in 1796, studied law but later established a career as a portrait painter in Philadelphia and New York. Childhood memories of his mother's account of her escape from a tribe of Iroquois and a chance encounter with a delegation of Plains Indians passing through Philadelphia inspired Catlin to undertake a pictorial documentation of all Indian tribes from the Alleghenies to the Rockies.

Recognizing the threat that industrialization and westward expansion posed to the Indians' survival, Catlin believed he could "snatch from oblivion . . . a truly lofty and noble race." For six years Catlin traveled throughout the North American continent, visiting forty-eight tribes and completing more than five hundred canvases. Despite the popularity of his paintings and his remarkable personal reputation as an author, lecturer, and showman, Catlin endured financial difficulties throughout most of his career.

Tempted by tales of a hidden cache of gold and the prospect of documenting little-known Indian tribes, Catlin joined a scientific expedition to South America. After a short period Catlin set out independently. Between 1854 and 1860, he and various companions journeyed from Venezuela to Tierra del Fuego, and then northward along the Pacific coast to Alaska. During this six-year period, Catlin painted hundreds of Indian portraits, landscapes, and genre scenes of tribal life, and wrote several books describing his adventures.

Whereas Catlin's early paintings reveal a warm rapport with his subjects, the South American works were often painted from a discreet distance. This was due, in large part, to his difficulty in communicating with the native populations. He was rapidly going deaf and was often unable to locate suitable interpreters in the remote regions he visited.

The South American paintings also differ markedly in technique from Catlin's earlier North American works. In place of canvas he painted on Bristol board which allowed the oil pigments to dry quickly and made the paintings less susceptible to mold in the humid tropical environment. Catlin also adopted a thinner, more sketchy painting technique to ensure rapid drying and to conserve materials during his arduous journeys.

After thirty-one years abroad Catlin returned to the United States. Exhibitions of his Indian paintings in New York and Washington received minimal notice. The nearly destitute painter died on December 23, 1872. In 1909 Catlin's daughter sold the remaining paintings to the American Museum of Natural History in New York. In the late 1950s the museum consigned most of the Catlin paintings to a commercial gallery which sold the pictures to Paul Mellon, art collector and then trustee of the National Gallery of Art. In 1965 Mellon donated more than 350 of the paintings to the Gallery.

The paintings in the exhibition South America: Paintings by George Catlin are from the Gallery's Paul Mellon Collection and encompass a variety of subjects. The exhibition includes group portraits such as Lengua Medicine Men with Two Warriors, activities such as Turtle Hunt and Ostrich Chase, Buenos Aires, and landscapes such as Rhododendron Mountain and View of the Pampa del Sacramento.

The exhibition was selected by Nancy Anderson, National Gallery assistant curator of American Art. The exhibition was organized through the National Lending Service of the National Gallery of Art.