



## 2nd Grade: NOVEMBER

### *Máh-to-tóh-pa, “Four Bears”*

#### George Catlin

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#### **About the Artist**

The following information is provided to give classroom teachers a comprehensive understanding of the artist and artwork. Use your judgment on what to share with your students based on their level of curiosity, observation/inquiry skills, comprehension and age-appropriateness.

#### **George Catlin**

George Catlin was born to Putnam and Polly Sutton Catlin on July 26, 1796, in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. He grew up in a home with many siblings—the fifth of fourteen! His father was an attorney and desired his son to study law, but Catlin’s mother had more influence on her son. As a young child, she and her family had been held captive by Iroquois Indians. They were treated well by the Indians during their captivity. Catlin’s mother often shared stories of her life among the Iroquois with her son. Western explorers who visited with the large Catlin family added their stories as well. Catlin was taught to view Indians as decent people who cared for their families and respected the earth. This knowledge intrigued Catlin and set the direction for his life.

Out of respect for his father whose health was failing, Catlin entered law school at age twenty-one and opened a law practice with his brother in Pennsylvania. As interest in art emerged, he practiced painting without the tutelage of masters. By age twenty-eight he left law to pursue his artistic interests full time. One year later Catlin was admitted to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. He experienced limited success painting everyday portraits and miniatures until he witnessed a group of Plains Indians passing through town on their way to Washington, D.C. Catlin was so impressed with their posture and dignity that he knew where he wanted to focus his attention.

The thought of lawyer turned artist turned frontier explorer was more than his family could bear. The small-statured young man (135 pounds, 5’8” tall) did not physically measure up to the image of an explorer type in perilous situations and so Catlin faced discouragement from every family member and friend. Despite the lack of support, Catlin knew his interest in recording the life of Indians would serve the country well. In 1831, Catlin traveled to St. Louis, Missouri, to meet with noted explorer General William Clark, United States Superintendent of Indian Affairs and Governor of the Missouri Territory. Catlin received permission to travel with Clark into the frontier, becoming the first painter to travel west through remote Indian territory with the sole purpose of learning about the Indians. This first expedition and others that came later included visits to Alaska, the Northern, Mid-western and Southern plains, as well as South America. In all of his trips, Catlin never learned a native language but he was befriended by

members of the Blackfoot, Ponca, Crow, Plains, Sioux, Chipewewa and Mandan tribes. In all, Catlin visited more than one hundred-forty tribes. He used this time to write about and sketch the lives of the people, including their rituals, appearance, weapons, costumes, even diet. He captured women, warriors, and chiefs on more than three hundred twenty-five canvases and collected artifacts. Catlin viewed his notes, sketches and paintings as both art and historical documentation of a population whose future was grim, nearing extinction.

In 1837, Catlin began to exhibit *Indian Gallery*, his collection of works, to viewers in Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Washington. Catlin always invited a group of Native Americans to these exhibitions to attract audiences. Admission prices were increased to help pay the bills. In the same vein, Catlin had hopes the paintings would be of interest to the government which would purchase his collection. The lack of federal funding for such purchases and the disinterest of some politicians in the Indian population barred any purchases.

George Catlin later shifted his attention to the European market and brought his eight ton exhibition to London in 1839 and Paris in 1844. These exhibitions featured Native American performers in a Wild West Show. While the exhibition was first well received, popularity slowly diminished, bringing financial ruin to Catlin who had personally financed it. At this time Catlin’s wife, Clara, died of pneumonia. One year later, his son died from typhoid fever. Bankruptcy in 1852 forced Catlin to send his daughters to relatives in the United States. The answer to Catlin’s financial struggles came through locomotive manufacturer Joseph Harrison who agreed to purchase Catlin’s collection. Eighteen years later, the seventy-four year old George Catlin returned to the United States and was reunited with his grown daughters.

George Catlin died of Bright’s disease on December 23, 1872, at the age of seventy-six in Jersey City, New Jersey. Catlin’s collection was donated to the Smithsonian Institute by the widow of Joseph Harrison in 1879. His five hundred works were dispersed to many locations in Washington D.C. The American Museum of Natural History in New York received some seven hundred sketches. Today George Catlin’s works are considered great contributions which document the Native American culture at a crucial time in history.

#### **About the Art**

*Máh-to-tóh-pa, Four Bears, Second Chief in Full Dress* was painted in 1832, oil on canvas. The 29 x 24 inch painting of the Mandan second chief is currently the property of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. It was a gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr.

## Discipline-Based Art Education

The following components are integral to students having a complete, well rounded art experience.

### Art Aesthetics

Providing opportunities to develop perception and appreciation of visually expressed ideas and experiences.

### Art Production

Providing opportunities to develop skills and techniques for creative visual expressions of emotions and ideas.

### Art History

Providing opportunities to develop an understanding of the visual arts as a basic component of personal heritage.

### Art Criticism

Providing an opportunity to develop an intellectual basis for analyzing and making aesthetic judgments based on an understanding of visual ideas and experiences.

## ELEMENTS OF ART

- Line: A continuous mark
- Shape: Area enclosed by a line
- Color: Hue, reflection of light.
- Texture: Surface quality, real or implied
- Form: 3D shape or illusion of 3D
- Value: Graduated areas of light/dark
- Space: Illusion of depth

## PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN

- Repetition: Imagery repeating pattern
- Variety: Contrast/variation
- Rhythm: Issues of eye movement
- Balance: Even visual weight
- Emphasis/Economy: Dominance/minimalism
- Proportion: Compare size relationships

## COMPOSITION

- Symmetrical: Mirrored imagery
- Asymmetrical: Random placement
- Radial: Mirror image from center point
- Repetition: Repeating pattern, motif

## ARTISTIC STYLES

- Realism: Realistic representation
- Abstraction: Personal interpretation
- Non-Objective: No recognizable depiction

## ELEMENTS OF DESIGN IN PICTURE BOOKS

Children's literature that relate to this lesson due to elements of art or story content are:

- *Guests* by Michael Doris (Modoc)
- *Lewis and Clark: Art of the Upper Missouri*, Ken Rogers and Tim Fought, editors
- *The Man Who Painted Indians*, George Catlin by Nancy Plain
- *Portrait of Spotted Deer's Grandfather* by Amy Littlelugar

## REFERENCE/BIBLIOGRAPHY

- *Catlin, George. Letters and Notes on the American Indians.* New York: Gramercy Books. 1975
- Dippe, Brian, Christopher Mulvey, Joan Carpenter Troccoli, Therese, Thau Heyman. *George Catlin and His Indian Gallery.* Smithsonian American Art Museum and W.W. Norton & Company. 2002
- *Hughes, Robert. American Visions, The Epic History of Art in America.* Alfred A. Knopf, Publisher, New York. 1997

George Catlin had only a limited amount of time to paint his Indian portraits. Rather than sketching the image onto canvas, Catlin chose quick strokes of the paint brush to capture the outline of the figure before filling in the entire canvas with colors. He had only about a dozen paint colors with him during his travels. To maximize a sense of the exotic Catlin chose bold colors, a style consistent with his later works.

George Catlin writes of the Indians' reactions to his portraits. Some were alarmed as they felt a portrait would cause an early death. Others thought a portrait would ensure they would live on after they died.

Catlin tells of Four Bears' sitting. He speaks of Four Bears' grace and manly dignity as he entered the tent and the details of his costume—the embroidered leggings, the decorated shirt with recorded battle imagery, the eagle feather-lined headdress and the noted buffalo horns which were a sign of power in his tribe. Catlin responded to this rich imagery by painting one of his most noted portraits.

### Directed Observation

Show students an image of *Máh-to-tóh-pa*, "Four Bears" and tell them it was painted with oil paint on canvas by George Catlin in 1832. Invite students to quietly study the work. After some time for thinking, encourage students to share what they see. Welcome all comments. The following questions are provided to help students use art vocabulary to talk about the work.

1. Based on clues (costume, posture, colors, headdress, spear) the artist George Catlin gives you, what can you tell about the person in the painting?
2. Máh-to-tóh-pa or Four Bears is the name of this person who was a second chief of the Mandan Indian tribe. What do you know about the Mandan tribe? (Offer students some background information or encourage them to do some research.)
3. If George Catlin painted Four Bears seated on a chair, how would it leave a different impression of Four Bears? How does the position and/or posture of a model change the status of the individual?
4. Looking at the painting of Four Bears, think of several questions you would like to ask him. Think of several questions you could ask George Catlin.
5. People have different characteristics. How do you paint pride? strength? bravery? power? weakness? fear?
6. Pride is feeling respect or honor because of what one has accomplished. Discuss how the stance of Four Bears shows

pride. If someone were to paint you and capture your pride, how would the artist paint you? What props would you bring to your sitting? What would you wear?

7. George Catlin is remembered for the work he did studying the Native Americans and recording his findings. In what are you so interested that you would spend your life studying?

### Things to Do

1. George Catlin painted portraits in a time before photography was available. The paintings were used to teach others about the Indians. Draw or paint something that would help others know more about your subject.
2. Read or have others read to you about the lives of Indians. Draw pictures to show what you learned.
3. George Catlin often wrote poetry about his subjects. This helped him to take a close look at his subjects and understand them better. Try that as well.
4. If possible, invite a Native American or another individual in ethnic clothing to serve as a model for drawing.
5. Using groups of two, have one student pose for a portrait while the other student paints or draws it. Be sure to stand or sit in a way to show your pride.
6. Visit the local field museum or zoo and study the various landscapes used as background for displays. Practice this art form in a diorama made from a small box. Include a landscape and figures as part of the diorama.
7. Locate other George Catlin paintings. Choose one and write a story about it. Students can use the same painting as inspiration and then see how many different stories can be created. Feel free to group students into writing teams as this fosters creativity.
8. Linking to #6 under Directed Observation, invite students to get involved with portraiture by photographing each other in particular poses. You could have every student identify two personal qualities and strike a pose for each one.
9. Invite a professional portrait photographer, caricature artist and/or a portrait painter to class to share their individual artwork with the class.
10. Follow the steps of explorers Lewis and Clark. Take a walk into new territory and record your finding in words or sketches. If you live in the city, explore the country. If you live in the country, explore the city. Try to map your journey. Exhibit your maps and sketches. You may also use a camera to document your journey.