

University of Oklahoma College of Law

## University of Oklahoma College of Law Digital Commons

---

American Indian and Alaskan Native Documents in the Congressional Serial Set: 1817-1899

---

6-24-1846

### Catlin's Indian gallery

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.law.ou.edu/indianserialset>



Part of the [Indigenous, Indian, and Aboriginal Law Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

H.R. Rep. No. 806, 29th Cong., 1st Sess. (1846)

This House Report is brought to you for free and open access by University of Oklahoma College of Law Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in American Indian and Alaskan Native Documents in the Congressional Serial Set: 1817-1899 by an authorized administrator of University of Oklahoma College of Law Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [Law-LibraryDigitalCommons@ou.edu](mailto:Law-LibraryDigitalCommons@ou.edu).

CATLIN'S INDIAN GALLERY.

JULY 24, 1846.

Read, and laid upon the table.

Mr. W. W. CAMPBELL, from the Joint Committee on the Library, made the following

REPORT:

*The Joint Committee on the Library, to whom was referred the memorial of Mr. Catlin, for the purchase of his gallery of Indian collections and paintings, and also the memorial of American artists abroad, and of American citizens resident in London, respectfully report:*

That of Mr. Catlin, who desires to place, on certain conditions, his extensive collection of Indian portraits, costumes, and other objects of interest connected with Indian life, in the possession of the government, it is hardly necessary to speak, since his reputation is established throughout this country and Europe. A native of the State of Pennsylvania, his early studies were directed to the law, which, under an impulse of enthusiasm that often marks original genius, he soon abandoned for the pencil, stimulated by desire to give to his country exact and spirited representations of the persons, costumes, ceremonies, and homes of the aboriginal inhabitants of this continent, now retreating and gradually vanishing away before the power of civilization. Nor did he devote himself to his enterprise merely to gratify curiosity and preserve memorials of a bold, independent, and remarkable race of men; but to direct attention to certain lofty traits of their character, and excite, generally, friendly sentiments and efforts for their benefit. In making this collection, he expended eight entire years of his life and \$20,000 in money, and visited, often at great hazard of his personal safety, more than forty different (and most of them very remote) tribes. Unaided by public or private patronage, he pursued and effected his object, sustained, as he observes, by the ambition of procuring a full and complete pictorial history of a numerous and interesting race of human beings, rapidly sinking into oblivion, and encouraged by the belief that the collection would finally be appropriated and protected by the government of his own country, as a monument to a race once sole proprietors of this country, but who will soon have yielded it up, and with it probably their existence also, to civilized man.

On Mr. Catlin's return from the western prairies, the attention of Congress was, in 1837 and 1838, turned towards his collection, and a resolution for its purchase was moved in the House, and referred to the Committee on Indian Affairs, who, it is understood, expressed in their report

a unanimous opinion in favor of the purchase, though the near approach of the close of the session prevented its being submitted for consideration.

In transferring his collection to Europe, Mr. Catlin had no intention of alienating it, or changing its nationality and destination; but, by its exhibition, sought to secure support for his family, and obtain means of bringing out his great and expensive work on the Indians—a work which has thrown much light upon their character and customs, and been received with distinguished favor on both sides of the Atlantic.

The judgment of our citizens, and that of eminent foreigners, is concurrent in regard to the value of this collection for the illustration of our history, and as a work of art. By desire of the King of France, it now occupies a gallery in the Louvre, and has been highly eulogized by the most distinguished artists and men of science in Paris. A large gold medal has been presented to Mr. Catlin by the King of the Belgians, with a letter expressing a high opinion of his productions.

The American artists now in Paris, in a memorial addressed to Congress, urging the importance of securing this collection to our country, say: "Having made ourselves acquainted with the extent and interest of this unique collection, and of its peculiar interest to our country; and also aware of the encouraging offers now made to its proprietor for its permanent establishment in England, as well as the desire generally manifested here to have it added to the historical gallery at Versailles, we have ventured to unite in the joint expression of our anxiety that the members of the present Congress may pass some resolution that may be the means of restoring so valuable a collection to our country, and fixing it among its records. Interesting to our countrymen generally, it is absolutely necessary to American artists. The Italian who wishes to portray the history of Rome, finds remnants of her sons in the Vatican. The French artist can study the ancient Gauls in the museums of the Louvre; and the Tower of London is rich in the armor and weapons of the Saxon race.

"Your memorialists, therefore, most respectfully trust that Mr. Catlin's collection may be purchased and cherished by the federal government, as a nucleus for a national museum, where American artists may freely study that bold race who once held possession of our country, and who are so fast disappearing before the tide of civilization. Without such a collection, few of the glorious pages of our early history can be illustrated, while the use made of it here by French artists, in recording upon canvass the American discoveries of their countrymen in the last century, shows its importance."

Your committee feel the justice of these sentiments of American artists, and also the importance, as suggested in their memorial, of securing, by the purchase of his collection, the future efforts of Mr. Catlin for its enlargement. Let the government appropriate his collection, and the chief ambition of its author's life will be realized, and he will be enabled, in a few years, to double it in value and extent.

The bill which has recently passed the House for the establishment of the Smithsonian Institution provides that there shall belong to it a "gallery of art;" and of course it must be intended that such gallery shall be occupied by works of art. That such works should be principally American, is the obvious dictate of patriotism. No productions, your com-

mittee believe, at present exist, more appropriate to this gallery than those of Mr. Catlin, or of equal importance. Should Congress fail to act on the subject, or decide unfavorably to Mr. Catlin's proposal, he may, notwithstanding his extreme reluctance, be compelled to accept the positive and advantageous offers now made to him in England.

The love of art, and respect for those who have cultivated it with success, especially for those who have illustrated, by their productions, the history of their country, have ever been cherished by the most civilized nations. It has been justly observed, that "among the Greeks the arts were not so much objects to promote gratification as of public interest; they were employed as the most powerful stimulants of piety and patriotism, commissioned to confer distinction upon those who were conspicuous for valor, for wisdom, and for virtue. A statue or a picture gave celebrity to a city or a state, and a great artist was considered a national ornament—a public benefactor, whom all were bound to honor and reward."

Your committee believe the price of his collection, as named by Mr. Catlin, is moderate, and that a failure to obtain it would occasion deep regret to all the friends of art, and to all Americans who reasonably and justly desire to preserve memorials of the Indian race, or the means by which our future artists and historians may illustrate the great and most interesting events in the early periods and progress of our country.

The committee therefore recommend that the bill for the establishment of the Smithsonian Institute be so amended as that provision shall be made therein for the purchase of Mr. Catlin's gallery at the price mentioned by him—namely, sixty-five thousand dollars—payable in annual instalments of ten thousand dollars.