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Report : Mr. Seward

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IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES.

JUNE 23, 1852.

Ordered to be printed.

Mr. SEWARD made the following

REPORT:

[To accompany joint resolution S. No. 43.]

The Select Committee, to whom was referred a resolution of the Senate, directing them to inquire into the expediency of purchasing Mr. George Catlin's collection of Indian scenes and portraits, submit the following report:

That George Catlin is an American citizen who was born and educated in the State of Pennsylvania, gifted with genius for the arts, and imbued with a spirit of enthusiastic devotion to the fame of his country in early life; without either public or private patronage he repaired to the haunts of the savages in the recesses of the continent, and winning their kindness and confidence, while as yet the white man was almost unknown to them, he visited in a period of eight years forty-eight tribes, and in the end brought away this very large collection of paintings, which exhibits with great felicity complete views of the most interesting of the forest and prairie scenes of the continent, with portraits of the various characters found there, and ample illustrations of the political, social, and religious customs, ceremonies and costumes of the races; a collection which gratifies an enlightened curiosity now, and will with the progress of time acquire inestimable value as an aid to the philosopher and the historian in the study of human nature in a peculiar stage of development, never before sufficiently marked.

Having completed his collection, Mr. Catlin in 1837 exhibited it in this city, and in pursuance of his original purpose offered it to the government. A committee reported favorably on that proposition, but delays occurred, and Mr. Catlin, without abandoning his wish for such an eventual disposition of his collections, took them to Europe as well to support himself by exhibiting it as to use it in preparing a great work since completed, on the history, customs, and manners of the North American Indians.

The collection excited much interest and admiration in Europe, and obtained for Mr. Catlin many marks of respect and consideration from the friends of science and the arts in foreign courts. While it remained at Paris the American artist, then residing there, and among whom were several whose fame has become a part of our national glory, addressed a memorial to Congress praying them to adopt measures to restore the collection to our country, and to place it among her records. In support of this proposition they remarked that the collection was not only interesting to our country-

men generally, but absolutely necessary to American artists; that the Italian who wished to portray the history of Rome, found remnants of her sons in the Vatican; that the French artist could study the ancient Gauls in the museum of the Louvre; that the tower of London was rich in the armour and weapons of the Saxon race; and that without such a collection, few of the glorious pages of our early history could be illustrated.

The same view of the subject was taken by the joint committee on the library of Congress, to whom that interesting memorial was referred. More recently a communication has been submitted to Congress by several eminent members of the Historical Society of New York, recommending the purchase of the collection on substantially the same grounds.

The select committee concur in these opinions, and they respectfully add that, admitting the merit of the collection which is conclusively established by documents now before the Senate, and admitting also the ability of the government to secure it, which cannot reasonably be denied, no argument can be brought against the purchase of it on just and reasonable terms, which would not equally weigh against every appropriation by Congress for the acquisition and preservation of the materials of science and of history; against the deposite of contemporaneous works in the library of Congress; the illustration of grand and interesting events in the national progress on canvass and in marble which grace the chambers, walls and gardens of the Capitol, and indeed against all the treasures of science and art already gathered into the archives of the country. Copiousness is essential to the value of the instructions of history, and if we should attempt to discriminate between the various materials gathered for such a use, surely the last that this great and generous people should exclude would be those that supply our scanty information concerning the great and heroic, yet simple races, whom with a strong arm and little tenderness we are expelling, and perhaps unavoidably, exterminating throughout the broad domain of which they once were undisturbed and unquestioned occupants. To reject the cultivation and perfection of the arts altogether, would be to concede that in all that makes us differ from the savage tribes, we are neither better nor wiser than they. In all countries, and especially in a republic, the great responsibility of those who are charged with the conduct of the affairs of society is the education of the people in valor, wisdom, and virtue. There is no point at which such education can be wisely arrested, since the more complete and universal education becomes, the more fully the democratic principal is developed, and the more safely and easily is free government sustained.

While the responsibilities of education, in a strict sense, rest upon the several States, the right and duty of the United States to promote that great object incidentally in the administration of the national domain, and in its exclusive legislation in the District of Columbia have been fully acknowledged and practically exercised and performed since the foundation of the government. The committee invoke the performance of a similar duty now. Why should not the Capital of the United States take on the classic dignity and the refinement worthy of the seat of government of a great people. How shall we better strengthen the bonds of union, than by rendering the Capital an object of pride and interest to the people of every State? How shall we impress mankind with the excellence of the republican system more easily and more effectually than by exhibiting to them the archives of art and science in the classic seat of republican authority.

The committee submit with this report, a letter recently received from **Mr. Catlin**, which brings the painful intelligence that he has sunk under the pressure of debts and is now imprisoned, while his collection is advertised to be sold on execution in London. Under these circumstances, he reduces his price to the government from \$65,000, its former estimated worth, to \$25,000. While these unhappy circumstances furnish no sufficient ground for interposition by the government for his relief, they may nevertheless be allowed to stimulate us to the action recommended, if, as has been argued, it is wise and proper in itself.

It is obvious, that without a careful inspection of the collection, so as to ascertain its present condition and value, it would be unwise to name a definite price. The committee therefore recommend that the subject be entrusted to an agent to be appointed by the President, with a limited discretion.

The committee respectfully beg leave to submit a joint resolution in conformity with this result.