11: George Catlin *Shooting Flamingoes* (1857)

Peter Ogden Brown

George Catlin, said the *New York Morning Herald* in 1837, was "destined to be the Audubon of the Indians,"[1] and in the twenty-first century it is for his work on Indians that he is most remembered. But twenty years later, after his original now-famous "Indian Collection" had been rescued by a friend from his creditors and warehoused in Philadelphia,[2] he was painting scenes on commission from Colt's Patent Firearms, of which *Shooting Flamingoes* was one of ten.[3]

The scene shows Catlin himself discharging the company's unique revolving cylinder rifle into a huge flock of flamingos rising from a salt lake (the Grand Saline) on the Rio Salado, south of Buenos Aires.[4] Catlin published a detailed account of the event in 1868, describing how he and a native guide crept up on the nesting birds. The artist was struck by the intense, contrasting colors of the flamingo, noting that "its chief color is pure white, with parts of its wings the most flaming red and another portion jet black." He also described the nest-building techniques of these "beautiful birds," combining grass and weeds with mud to form open cones about a foot in height and spaced two to three feet apart. He observed that, while in winter the nests were inundated by the rising waters of the lake, in summer, with the water's evaporation, they would reemerge and be restored by the birds in order to provide homes for new broods.[5]

George Catlin,
1796–1872
Shooting Flamingoes, 1857
Oil on canvas, 19 x 26½ in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
41.25

Proud of his repeating rifle, which he had nicknamed "Sam" after its maker, Samuel Colt, he acknowledged that

> *I had no chance to sketch, as Sam was before me in both hands and motions would have been imprudent; but I had the most perfect chance to see and to study (to sketch in my mind) every attitude and every characteristic....*[6]

Once disturbed, the flamingos rose in formation, allowing Catlin to rake them with shot. He emptied his first cylinder and loaded and discharged a second before realizing that in his excitement, he had struck his young companion on the temple with the gun, knocking the boy down in fear of his life.[7] In the painting the two still bear on their backs the bundles of cut green branches they had used to disguise their advance on the unsuspecting birds. The artist's preference for strong colors and patterns is evident in the painting. A companion picture, *Ambush for Flamingoes*, depicting the more peaceful scene only a few minutes before, can be found in the collection of Pittsburgh's Carnegie Museum of Art.

George Catlin (1796–1872) and Samuel Colt (1814–1862) were good friends, with many parallels in their lives. They were both largely self-taught in their occupations, highly inventive, strong marketers, but subject to financial instability and wanderlust. As a sixteen-year-old, Colt developed his first idea for a percussion revolver while serving as a crewman on a Boston clipper ship bound for Calcutta, using his spare time to carve out prototype parts from wood. After his trial model exploded, he financed his continuing experiments by touring the country in 1832 in medicine shows as "Dr. Coult," promoting the surprising effects of nitrous oxide (laughing gas) on an unsuspecting public. Three years later he received a comprehensive patent for his cylinder weapons, but his factory was bankrupt by 1842. Securing a governmental contract to supply revolvers for the Mexican War in 1847, his reputation as a reliable and successful arms-maker was well established by the time he outfitted Catlin.[8]

George Catlin,
1796–1872
Ambush for Flamingoes,
ca. 1856–1857
Oil on canvas, 19 x 26⅛ in.
Carnegie Museum of Art,
Pittsburgh; Howard N.
Eavenson Memorial Fund for
the Howard N. Eavenson
Americana Collection, 72.7.2

Born in Wilkes-Barre, George Catlin practiced law in Pennsylvania before turning to art. In Philadelphia he became accepted as a miniaturist and portrait painter, despite little formal training.[9] The appearance there in 1829 of a Native American delegation on their way to Washington inspired a six-year undertaking on his part to capture their vanishing culture in writings and on canvas. He assembled the hundreds of resulting works into an "Indian Gallery," but ultimately failed in his plan to sell the collection to the United States government for the handsome reward which he intended.[10]

Showmanship for Catlin was the ingredient necessary to make his somewhat unrefined art commercially rewarding. In 1839 he and his family moved to England, where he continued to operate his Indian Gallery, though with only marginal success despite surprise appearances by the Catlin clan disguised as Native Americans. It was not until he imported real Indians for this purpose that his venture began to flourish, culminating in a royal audience at Windsor in 1843.

But Catlin's fortunes continued to be uneven as he wore out his audiences and tried unsuccessfully to promote ideas for a "Floating Museum" in 1851 and a life-saving "steam raft" in 1860.[11] In between, driven first by rumors of lost gold mines and later influenced by the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt,[12] he traveled extensively in both South and North America, Alaska, and Siberia, primarily exploring and documenting indigenous cultures and, along the way, executing Samuel Colt's commission. Other paintings in the series, most of which were turned into commercial lithographs for advertising purposes by Colt, included depictions of the artist demonstrating the repeating rifle to a council of South American Indians, scaring off a pair of jaguars from his Brazilian camp, and saving a colleague from wild boars, as well as scenes of hunting buffalo and rheas from the saddle.[13]

In the 1860s, separated by creditors from his first Indian Collection, Catlin, now working in Belgium, recreated many of the paintings from early sketches, adding the depictions from his more recent expeditions in what has come to be known as the "Cartoon Collection." Eventually transferred to the American Museum of Natural History in New York, the Cartoon Collection was later largely deaccessioned.[14] The Smithsonian continues to prize 445 paintings from the original Indian Collection given to them by Catlin's widow.[15] Thus, although Catlin's desire to inform the world about the already fast-disappearing native cultures of the Americas was often frustrated by the difficulties he encountered in marketing his work for what he believed to be necessary personal gain, the great corpus was ultimately preserved to provide an irreplaceable record of those societies.

George Catlin and Samuel Colt enjoyed a friendship based upon a shared love of adventure and entrepreneurialism, for which the young nation supplied opportunities in abundance. Their kindred spirits were perfectly suited for mutual benefit, with Colt commissioning Catlin's paintings for popular reproduction of exotic hunting scenes demonstrating the efficacy of Colt's patent firearms. While such an image of indiscriminate slaughter as *Shooting Flamingoes* makes us cringe today, it should be viewed as the artistic record of an exciting event of a different time with very different popular values.[16]

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