

"CARL BODMER PAINTS THE INDIAN  
FRONTIER"

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An Appreciation of Carl Bodmer's Indian Paintings

No other primitive peoples have stirred the interest and imagination of the civilized world as have the North American Indians of the Great Plains. Their striking physical appearance, their prowess as warriors and big game hunters, their picturesque costumes and colorful religious ceremonies have made them particularly attractive to artists. Scores of European and American artists have sought to interpret graphically the essential character of Plains Indian life. Among them Carl Bodmer achieved an outstanding success.

When Prince Maximilian zu Wied chose Bodmer to accompany him on a year-long expedition into the wilds of the Indian country of the Upper Missouri he charged the young artist with a difficult and definite responsibility. Bodmer was to execute drawings from life which would become an integral part of the scientific record of the expedition. It was important that the pictorial record should be as truthfully rendered as were the words of Prince Maximilian's text.

To this exacting task Carl Bodmer brought talent of a high order. He had been schooled in the European tradition of fine draftsmanship that had produced such masters of drawing as Durer and Brueghel. With infinite pains and consummate skill Bodmer first executed a pencil drawing of his subject. Then, in most cases, he added its true colors in watercolor. Bodmer's Indians are never hasty impressions or vague generalizations of some idealized Indian type. They are bold, clear likenesses of individuals. The exact forms of their garments, the precise patterns and colors of decorations in paints, dyed porcupine quills and glass trade beads, the shapes and colors of elaborate hair and neck ornaments and the details of weapons and other accessories are delineated meticulously. These pictures possess a remarkable sharpness and depth of focus.



The same qualities of accurate observation and precise execution may be seen in Bodmer's scenes of Indian villages and trading posts, of Indian burials and sacrificial places. In his landscapes he recorded the varied character of the Indian country, its broad rivers and plains, its bluffs and its mountains, as faithfully as he portrayed the likenesses of the Indians.

For many years anthropologists and historians have praised Bodmer's truthful interpretation of the Indians of the Upper Missouri. They have known his pictures only through the lithographs developed from his original field drawings and watercolors. This exhibition of originals, which includes many subjects never published, will serve to broaden and increase the understanding and appreciation of the important contribution of Carl Bodmer, master painter of American Indians.

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