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## Review of Catlin and His Contemporaries; The Politics of Patronage

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*Catlin and His Contemporaries: The Politics of Patronage.* By Brian W. Dippie. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990. Illustrations, photographs, notes, bibliographical notes, index. xix + 553 pp. \$50.00.

Brian Dippie provides a corrective to the image of George Catlin as a hopeless romantic. Stung by criticism in eastern artistic circles, Catlin headed west on "a new path to fame and fortune" (p. 11). After a few years visiting the Indians, he spent more than thirty years hustling to find a patron and to market his work. That he failed to do so was not for want of effort. According to Dippie, Catlin would "try anything to make a dollar from his art" (p. 21) and Indians were worth more to him dead than alive once he had captured their likenesses: "Catlin's heart might bleed, but his eye was coolly fixed on the main chance" (p. 117).

In recounting the struggles of Catlin and his

contemporaries to secure patronage from a tight-fisted Congress, Dippie introduces a fascinating cast of characters who crossed Catlin's stage in the mid-nineteenth century. Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, Seth Eastman, Thomas L. McKenney and James Hall, Paul Kane, Charles Bird King, John Mix Stanley, Ephraim George Squier, and others all shared Catlin's view that "vanishing Americans" could be a paying proposition. Their competition for slices of a very small, and sometimes non-existent, patronage pie fueled their rivalries and intertwined their lives.

But Catlin is the core of the book and its real strength. Driven by ambition, he sought patronage on two continents and was sometimes reduced to the role of showman and shameless self-promoter. He endured criticism of his work and ridicule of his depictions of Native rituals; he suffered personal tragedy in the loss of wife and child and financial disaster that cost him his Indian gallery; he met repeated indifference from Congress at home and saw patronage snatched from his grasp by political turmoil abroad. He disappeared for years, traveling to South America where he painted more Indians. By old age, he seemed convinced there had been a conspiracy against him, with Schoolcraft, the United States government, and Dame Fortune among the ringleaders. Yet, despite a "mounting toll of sacrifices to his personal ambition" (p. 119), Catlin remains a figure for whom the reader retains some sympathy: a talented and single-minded individual, ill-rewarded in his life, yet to a large extent vindicated by history.

In a review of this length, of a book of this quality, there is little room for anything but praise. A couple of typographical errors on the maps and an inaccurate cross reference to the Osceola portrait irritate but do little to detract from this handsome book or from Dippie's impressive achievement.

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