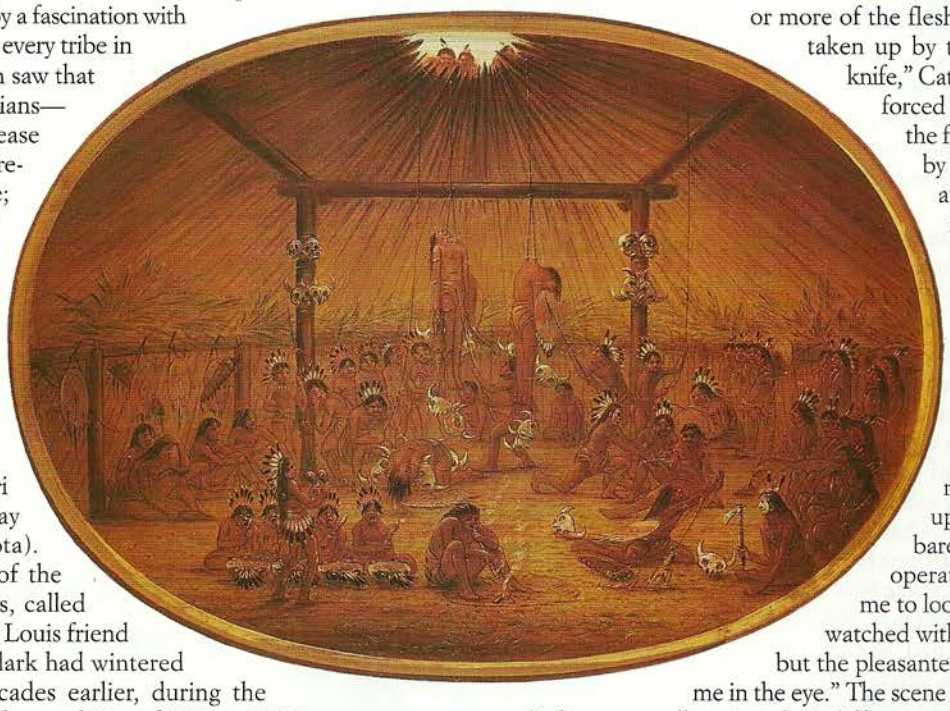
BY TOM CHAFFIN

Witness to a Lost Rite

In July 1832, the painter George Catlin plunged his paddle into the Missouri River's sun-rippled waters. It was the beginning of a winding, 2,000-mile canoe journey that began at the fur-trading post at Fort Union (at the confluence of the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers, on the border between present-day North Dakota and Montana) and ended in St. Louis.

Floating downstream, Catlin sketched and took notes on the wildlife he and his traveling companions—two Canadian fur trappers—spotted along the river's banks. Weeks beyond any permanent white settlement, deep in potentially fatal Indian country, Catlin brimmed with the passion of a man living out a dream. If anything haunted the 35-year-old Pennsylvanian, it was the mystery surrounding the Mandan Indians he was about to visit—and the self-torturous rites of passage that he aspired to paint.

After spending nearly a decade of his life as a portraitist, Catlin, inspired by a fascination with Indians, set out to paint every tribe in the young nation. Catlin saw that North America's Indians—already victims of disease and displacement—represented a dying culture; before they vanished, he was determined to capture them on canvas.



Seven days after leaving Fort Union, Catlin arrived at the Mandan village—a tight group of earthen lodges standing on a bluff above the Missouri River (near present-day Bismarck, North Dakota). Catlin had been told of the torturous Mandan rites, called the O-kee-pa, by his St. Louis friend Gen. William Clark. Clark had wintered with the Mandans decades earlier, during the famous Lewis-and-Clark expedition of 1804 to 1806.

There weren't many Mandans—they numbered no more than 2,000. To some white Americans, however, they were fascinating. "I find myself surrounded by subjects and scenes worthy of . . . the pencils of Raphael or Hogarth," Catlin wrote. After a local fur trader explained the painter's intentions, Catlin was given a lodge, and he began to work. "All were ready to be painted," he recalled. "My room [was] a continual resort for the chiefs, and braves, and medicine-men; where they waited with impatience for the completion of each one's picture."

It wasn't a given that Catlin would be invited to witness the O-kee-pa. But he was lucky enough to paint the medicine man who would oversee the ceremony, and the elder was so impressed with Catlin's talents that he conferred upon him the title of medicine man and, on the day of the event, personally escorted Catlin into the O-kee-pa lodge.

Catlin couldn't have imagined what would come next. Young men were turned over to the ritual's attendants. "An inch or more of the flesh on each shoulder was taken up by the man who held the knife," Catlin wrote. The knife was forced through the flesh below the fingers and was followed by a skewer, which another attendant pushed underneath the muscles to keep them from being torn out.

As illustrated here in Catlin's "The Torturing Scene," cords hung from a skylight were tied to the skewers, and Mandan on the roof hauled the men upward. Catlin could barely stand "all this horrid operation. [They] beckoned me to look at their faces, which I watched without detecting anything but the pleasantest smiles as they looked me in the eye." The scene reduced Catlin to tears.

Catlin eventually painted 48 different tribes, producing, in the process, more than 600 paintings. His works—all widely exhibited in both the United States and Europe—greatly influenced public perceptions of the West and eventually sealed his reputation as one of the foremost American artists of the era. Even so, many remained skeptical of his accounts of the O-kee-pa. Sadly, Catlin's paintings outlived the Mandan. In 1837, a smallpox epidemic decimated the tribe. ▲

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