

after Charles Bird King (American, 1785-1862)

Portrait from *History of the Indian Tribes of North America* by Thomas Loraine McKenney and James Hall

Philadelphia: E.C. Biddle, 1837.

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Thomas Loraine McKenney (1785-1859) was Superintendent of Indian Trade from 1816-1822 and the first Superintendent of Indian Affairs from 1824-1830. He is usually considered an early advocate of Native Americans in their dealings with the United States government. Although he was intrigued by native cultures, McKenney believed that Native Americans had to be mainstreamed into Anglo culture in order to keep them from dying out. Concerned that their way of life would disappear without documentation, McKenney commissioned artist Charles Bird King to paint portraits of individuals visiting Washington on diplomatic visits. His expressed goal in this project was to provide a record of vanishing peoples for future generations.

Overall, McKenney commissioned 147 portraits of Native Americans from King between 1822 and 1837. Most of the portraits depict the subjects in native dress, often wearing presidential medals or other government honors. King's sensitive rendering of individual expressions and characteristics make the portraits straightforward and engaging. MORE HERE ABOUT THE SPECIFIC PORTRAIT TO BE SHOWN.

McKenney also acquired watercolors and sketches from other artists, including James Otto Lewis and Karl Bodmer, and he collected weapons, clothing, and other artifacts from visiting native delegations. The Indian Gallery, as the collection of art and artifacts came to be known, was owned by the War Department until 1858, when it was moved to the Smithsonian Institution. The collection, along with the original oils and watercolors, was destroyed by fire in 1865.

Fortunately, the fire did not eradicate McKenney's legacy, which in many ways fulfills the purpose he hoped it would. In 1829, McKenney contracted with historian James Hall, publisher Samuel F. Bradford, and lithographer Henry Inman to publish reproductions of the images as part of an ambitious project entitled *The History of the Indian Tribes of North America*. The *History* was one of the most expensive publishing ventures undertaken in the United States at the time it was printed. The work as a whole included historical essays by Hall and over 100 lithographed portraits of individuals, each accompanied by a short biography. The project bankrupted Bradford in 1832, and it was beset with financial difficulties throughout its publication history. By the time of its completion in 1844, the *History* had gone through at least three publishers and several lithographers, with the first volume appearing in 1836 under the imprint of E.C. Biddle. Variations among the publishers, lithographers, and even the images included make it difficult to trace the publication's history. Missouri's copy consists of volumes published by E.C. Biddle in 1837, and D. Rice and J. G. Clark in 1842 and 1844.

Originally meant to entertain and inform Americans about the peoples who lived on their borders, the *History* is now an important source of primary information about native cultures that, as McKenney predicted, have largely vanished. The descriptions and images provide vivid records of native peoples and cultures during the early nineteenth century. The work remains,

according to print scholar Christopher Lane, “one of the most important American publications of any period.”

#### References

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