

AMERICAN INDIAN PORTRAITS

THE current exhibition of Portraits of American Indians from Pocahontas to Sitting Bull is, in a manner, a departure from the usual official exhibitions held by the Museum. It is, nevertheless pertinent to the scope of the Museum's work, for it has a large measure of ethnological significance in addition to its obvious historical (and perhaps artistic) interest. The present show does not pretend to be an art exhibition, though a special endeavour was made, in selecting the works included, to eliminate canvases which were of no real artistic merit and wherefore it is perhaps regrettable that so many works of Catlin were dismissed; there are plenty of Catlin's paintings available but, by and large, they are not acceptable either as portraits or as commendable works of art. To sustain this, the reader is urged to compare Catlin's portrait of Black Hawk—a very poor job of portraiture even though it is badly in need of restoration—with Sully's splendid canvas of this same individual. Having organized the present show with especial care, we are inclined to state that Catlin was neither a particularly accurate recorder nor a portrait painter of any great merit.

Special interest inevitably centers about the painting of Pocahontas in the present exhibition, the so-called Booton Hall painting lent by the A. W. Mellon Educational and Charitable Trust. Her portrait would seem to be the earliest known painting of any American Indian extant. It is certainly the earliest known portrait, in the sense of a painting from life for it was evidently painted during her three-year stay in England. The identity of the artist has not been established, though an effort will be made to do so. It has been suggested that it was done by a visiting Italian artist.

The fine full-length portrait by Benjamin West of Joseph Brant and also lent by the Mellon Trust is perhaps of greater interest artistically than scientifically for Joseph Brant is given a far from prominent position in the dark-hued background. But it is supplemented by the portrait of the same subject by James Wilson Peale from Independence Hall, also an admirable painting, obviously a study from life.

John White's drawings are, of course, the earliest studies of Indian types, the unique colored reproductions of which are lent by the United States National Museum.

Also from the United States National Museum is the portrait of Sitting Bull, believed to be the only authentic one known.



Matoaks als Rebecka daughter to the mighty Prince
Powhatan Emperour of Attanoughkomouck als Virginia
converted and baptized in the Christian faith, and
Wife to the wor^m M^r Tho: Rolfe.

PLATE VII. Portrait of Pocahontas by an unknown artist. Lent to the Museum through the courtesy of the A. W. Mellon Educational and Charitable Trust.

By far the largest loan is that from the Peabody Museum, Cambridge, twenty-five in all. These are copies by Henry Inman of C. B. King's originals, since destroyed by fire. However a fine collection of original portraits by King from the Redwood Library and Athenaeum, Newport, Rhode Island, are included.

The Museum's own collection, including several King's, Catlin's Black Hawk and many others, completes an exhibition probably the most comprehensive of its kind ever assembled.

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IMPRESSIONS OF AN ETHNOLOGIST

SO great was the appeal of European articles of apparel and adornment to the American Indian that they were adopted immediately after the first white contact. Since they often preceded, by means of trade, the advance of the settlers themselves, the first explorers often found the Indians wearing articles of civilized manufacture. Cloth and glass beads were especially desired by the natives. Seldom, therefore, was it the good fortune of a painter to be able to portray an Indian in strictly aboriginal garb. The most notable exception is the excellent—and ethnologically most important—group of sketches of natives of North Carolina made by John White in 1585. These show the Indians absolutely unaffected by European influence. The paucity of clothing is noteworthy, most of the natives, both men and women, being nude from the waist up and the knees down, and without foot gear. Body and face painting or tattooing takes the place of clothing. The hair was arranged in various coiffures, and ornaments of necklaces, bracelets and leg-ornaments were worn. The very long bows and wrist and finger-guards are shown.

These sketches doubtless give an accurate impression of the Indians of the North Carolina coast at the close of the sixteenth century; they are not idealized as regards physical types. Most of the very latest paintings, made toward the close of the nineteenth century, generally of Indians of the Great Plains, are also true to life, strong, life-like, upstanding figures, with their great eagle-feather headdresses and beaded clothing. The ten little paintings done on copper by Shindler are especially noteworthy.

Less typical and naturalistic are some of the paintings of the three centuries between, though most of these are also excellent portrayals of noble figures. Poor Pocahontas in her ruff and fan of a lady of the court shows little of her pure Indian blood in her brown hair and eyes and light complexion.