

THE JOSLYN Omaha World-Herald

ARTS & THEATRE

The Joslyn, Creighton team up on exhibit showing explorers' meetings with Native Americans

Dan Crisler | Jul 10, 2025

In 1832, German Prince Maximilian of Wied-Neuwied and Swiss artist Karl Bodmer sailed across the Atlantic Ocean to embark on an expedition across America.

Maximilian and Bodmer particularly sought to explore the Midwest along the Missouri River. As the young United States government expanded its reach westward and displaced Native American tribes, Maximilian, who had earlier explored and documented his interactions with Brazilian Indigenous tribes, sought to meet with Native American tribes before they disappeared, said Simon Appleford, a history professor at Creighton University.

“In 1832, it’s right around the time of Indian Removal. (President Andrew) Jackson’s administration is pushing these changes on Native peoples,” Appleford said.

The duo largely followed the path of the Missouri River through present-day Missouri, the Nebraska-Iowa border, South Dakota, North Dakota and Montana. Along the way, Maximilian documented his expedition experiences and interactions with approximately 30 Indigenous tribes in hundreds of journal entries written in High German.

Bodmer, meanwhile, captured the scenes by creating hundreds of illustrations of natural scenic beauty and portraits of Indigenous people. Bodmer illustrated the scenes using a variety of methods, including watercolors, graphite and ink.

A rotating physical selection of a handful of Bodmer’s artwork and two pages from an open volume of Maximilian’s handwritten journal can be found within the [Joslyn Art Museum](#) in downtown Omaha as part of its permanent galleries.

A new addition to the physical space of the gallery is a large, touchscreen monitor where visitors can navigate a web portal to view all of Bodmer's images and every page of Maximilian's journals.

In the room's center is a buffalo robe on loan from the Ethnological Museum of Berlin through summer 2027.

This web portal, called [The Natural Face of North America](#), is the culmination of a collaboration between Creighton University, Nebraska Indian Community College and the art museum, with input from tribal and cultural leaders from the Umo'ho' Nation and the Three Affiliated Tribes, Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation.

The website includes digital representations of Bodmer's 412 artworks made during the expedition, 806 of Maximilian's translated journal entries and historical maps of where each piece of art and journal entry was created. The website's launch marks the first time Bodmer's images have been cross-referenced with Maximilian's journals.

"The web portal is part of decades of research and work that the museum has done," said Annika Johnson, associate curator of Native American Art at the museum.

The digitization project began about a decade ago, Appleford said. With Creighton University and The Joslyn just blocks from each other, the two institutions collaborated to share Bodmer's artistic works, which were already in the art museum's possession, and Maximilian's story to a wider audience.

"The vision that we had was to create an online portal that would be physically located here in the gallery" so visitors could learn more about the expedition beyond The Joslyn's walls, Appleford said. He added the website also allows people to take extensive looks at Maximilian's journals and Bodmer's works of art from the comfort of their homes.

The project has received significant boosts from the National Endowment for the Humanities, including a \$350,000 grant awarded in 2021. Humanities Nebraska also has awarded a \$10,000 grant for the project.

The \$350,000 grant coincided with the project's transformation. Adam Sundberg, a Creighton history professor, said the project was originally about preservation and improving access to Maximilian's and Bodmer's work.

The project evolved into something more significant about four years ago, after Johnson and Nebraska Indian Community College Professor Wynema Morris got involved. Sundberg said the project then became about preservation, access and interpretation.

This interpretation, which better balanced the Eurocentric views of Maximilian and Bodmer, was informed by speaking with Native American tribes, including the Omaha.

“On the one hand, these documents — whether it’s the text or the images — make it seem as if it just mirrors reality,” Sundberg said. “They’re wonderful documentation but always through the lens of their particular European sort of romantic and sort of enlightened sensibilities of their time.”

Given the scope and depth of Maximilian’s journals, digitizing the thousands of pages took some time.

Creighton student Logan Yogi spent an entire summer digitizing a year’s worth of Maximilian’s translated journal entries for the website. Yogi also mapped the locations of each journal entry on a map that reflected political and geographic boundaries at the time of Maximilian’s and Bodmer’s journey. Students and researchers also undertook a similar effort with Bodmer’s artworks.

“When you see those in the aggregate, you can really get a real sense of what the journey was like,” Yogi said.

Yogi was one of 29 students from Creighton and Nebraska Indian Community College on the Omaha Reservation in Macy, Nebraska, to work on the project.

Appleford said the “The Natural Face of North America” is designed to be an evolving project. Sundberg said the project can help preserve the languages of the Native American tribes. Both expressed hope of continually receiving input from more and more tribes.

“There are lots of opportunities to expand this,” Appleford said.