

Big Elk (Ongpatonga)



Henry Inman (American, 1801–1846)
after Charles Bird King (American, 1785–1862)

Big Elk (Ongpatonga) 1830s

oil on canvas, Museum purchase from the Edward R. Trabold
and Lulu H. Trabold Fund with additional funds from the
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In Henry Inman's copy of Charles Bird King's original portrait, *Big Elk (Ongpatonga)* appears to be portrayed as a classical orator from ancient Rome. Sculptural busts of famous politicians from this Roman period depicted the head and shoulders of the subject, often dressed in billowing fabrics. In this painting Big Elk's buffalo robe mimics the flowing curves of Roman dress while the prominent American Indian peace medal on his chest indicates his high status with the Omaha tribe. His expression is calm and composed, suggesting the great inner strength and intelligence, which gave him his talents as a speaker.

Most of what we know about Big Elk (c. 1770–1835) comes from the famous speeches he delivered as chief of the Omaha tribe. Respected by both American Indians and governmental officials, Big Elk negotiated several meetings with the United States while maintaining a peaceful relationship and allying the Omaha with the U.S. during the War of 1812. Despite his desire to coexist with Euro-Americans, he acknowledged that the native way of life was disappearing. Late in his life, Big Elk returned from treaty negotiations in Washington, D.C., and delivered the following prophetic address to his people:

My chiefs, braves, and young men, I have just returned from a visit to a far-off country toward the rising sun, and have seen many strange things. I bring to you news which it saddens my heart to think of. There is a coming flood which will soon reach us, and I advise you to prepare for it. Soon the animals which Wakon'da has given us for sustenance will disappear beneath this flood to return no more, and it will be very hard for you. Look at me; you see I am advanced in age; I am near the grave. I can no longer think for you and lead you as in my younger days. You must think for yourselves what will be best for your welfare. I tell you this that you may be prepared for the coming change. You may not know my meaning. Many of you are old, as I am, and by the time the change comes we may be lying peacefully in our graves; but these young men will remain to suffer. Speak kindly to one another; do what you can to help each other, even in the troubles with the coming tide. Now, my people, this is all I have to say. Bear these words in mind, and when the time comes think of what I have said.

Discussion Questions

Who was Big Elk (Ongpatonga)?

Why do you think he gave the speech to his people?

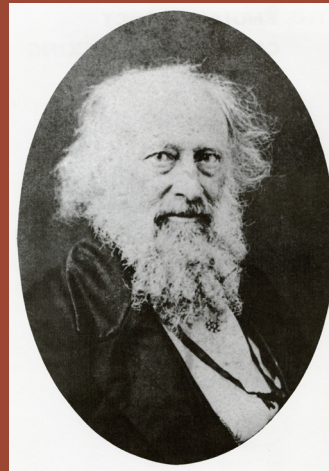
What is the significance of American Indian peace medals?

What is the relationship between Charles Bird King and Henry Inman?

How are Big Elk and the Fontenelle family related to each other?

Why was American Indian portraiture important?

American Indian Portraiture



Portrait of Charles Bird King,
photograph ca. 1860

Although today the artist Charles Bird King (1785–1862) is famous for his American Indian portraits, during the nineteenth century he was a renowned painter of high society in the northeastern United States. King painted some of the most prominent politicians and figures of the era, including Secretary of War James Calhoun, the Senator and U.S. Representative Henry Clay, and Mrs. John Quincy Adams. Prior to the Indian delegations of 1821 and 1822, only a few European artists had painted the American Indian. It was a young government official and important figure in American Indian relations, Superintendent of Indian Trade Thomas McKenney (1785–1859), who hired King to fill this portraitist role in 1821, initiating a long tradition of Indian portraiture by American artists.

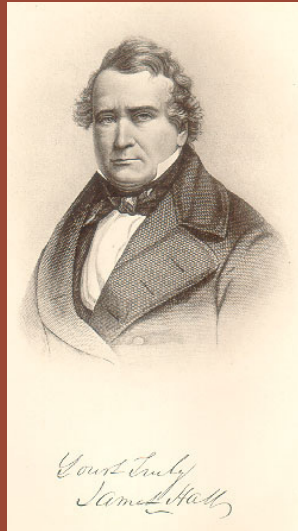
King painted the official Indian groups visiting the Capitol, and it was McKenney's expectation to display the portraits as a record of tribal life in the museum he founded: The Archives of the American Indian. In 1824 he was appointed the first head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs where he was charged with managing the funds appropriated to the "civilization of Indians." Ironically, while he was sympathetic to the plight of the American Indian believing that the Indian way of life was inevitably vanishing in the face of white civilization, McKenney was instrumental in the passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830 under President Andrew Jackson, which forcibly expelled native tribes in United States territory to west of the Mississippi River. Nevertheless he felt it was up to the U.S. government to document the traditions of the Indian before they disappeared altogether.

Over the following decades, King painted more than 140 portraits. In addition to exhibiting them in Washington D.C.'s first museum as intended, McKenney also published them between 1836 and 1844 in a three-volume guide to American Indian life titled *McKenney and Hall's Indian Tribes of North America*. In order to create these catalogs, McKenney shipped King's portraits to Philadelphia, where another artist known for his portraiture, Henry Inman (1801–1846) copied them. It is fortunate that he copied each of these paintings because the Smithsonian fire of 1865 destroyed nearly all of the originals.

For the publication, Philadelphia printmakers reproduced Inman's copies as hand-colored lithographs, and Illinois circuit judge James Hall wrote biographical information for them. Despite some historical inaccuracies, McKenney's Indian guide is an invaluable ethnographic resource of the last Upper Missouri tribal leaders, depicting their way of life before the Indian Removal Act.



Portrait of Thomas McKenney "Faithfully yours, Tho. W. McKenney" (left) and Portrait of James Hall "Yours truly, James Hall" from *The Indian Tribes of North America: with Biographical Sketches and Anecdotes of the Principal Chiefs...* A New Edition, Edited by Frederick Webb Hodge. 3 Vols. Edinburgh: John Grant, 31 George IV. Bridge, 1833



Portrait of Henry Inman, photograph by Mathew Brady ca. 1844–46, Daguerreotype collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

American Indian Peace Medals

During the early part of the nineteenth century, the U.S. Government invited delegations of American Indian tribes to visit the U.S. capitol, hoping to promote peaceful relations between Euro-Americans and native tribes along the Upper Missouri. While individual members of the delegations were rewarded with elaborate meals, gifts, white dress, and replicas of their portraits, the peace medals given by the Federal Government were the most desirable and conveyed immense status upon the recipient. The tradition of gifting symbolic medals of peace to American Indians dates back to the first French and Spanish explorers, who used them to establish harmonious relationships in the New World. The United States distributed the peace medals on numerous occasions, during ceremonial visits, treaty negotiations, and they were even dispersed to government outposts along the frontier.



Thomas Jefferson Medal (Obverse and Reverse), Robert Scott (active in Philadelphia 1781–1820) or John Reich (1768–1833), Silver, 55 mm, Oklahoma Historical Society

The medals produced by the U.S. Government were solid-silver, and portrayed the current U.S. president on the face, and two clasped hands along with a tomahawk and peace pipe on the back. Each medal also bore the inscription "Peace and Friendship." The medals were of various sizes, and the largest were awarded to the tribesman government officials deemed the most honorable, courageous or valuable for negotiations. American Indians saw these medals as prized possessions, and prominently wore them after returning to the Missouri river basin. Many Indians were buried wearing their medals, and others were prominently handed down from generation to generation. They held such symbolic weight for native tribes that Thomas McKenney, the head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, lamented that conducting negotiations with Indians was impossible without the gift of peace medals. Big Elk received a peace medal when he visited the capitol in 1821–22, and in each version of his portrait, the medal prominently hangs from a red ribbon around his neck.



Charles Bird King (American, 1785–1862), *Au Pantan Go Mahas Chief (Big Elk) Great Orator*, oil on canvas, The Lunder Collection, Colby College Museum of Art



Ongpatonga (Omaha), hand-colored lithograph after Charles Bird King (American, 1785–1862) from *The History of Indian Tribes of North America, 1836–1844*; edited by Thomas L. McKenney, Museum Purchase with funds provided by Suzanne and Walter Scott, Jr., 2007, Collection of Joslyn Art Museum



Charles Bird King (American, 1785–1862), *Portrait of Shaumonekusse (L'etan), an Oto Half-Chief*, oil on canvas, Gift of M. Knoedler & Co., New York, 1978, Collection of Joslyn Art Museum



Shaumonekusse (Oto), hand-colored lithograph after Charles Bird King (American, 1785–1862) from *The History of Indian Tribes of North America, 1836–1844*; edited by Thomas L. McKenney, Museum Purchase with funds provided by Suzanne and Walter Scott, Jr., 2007, Collection of Joslyn Art Museum

The Bellevue Fur Trade: the Fontenelles and the Omaha

French fur traders traveled up the Missouri to the Omaha area as early as 1800, establishing a post several miles above present day Council Bluffs. Within just a few years, American fur traders established posts in the vicinity, and over the following decades, they conducted a spirited trade with the Omaha tribe.

In 1823, The Missouri Fur Company, one of the earliest and largest trading companies in the region, built a post in Bellevue, Nebraska, located near the current site of the Fontenelle Forest Nature Center. Lucien Fontenelle (1800–1840), a fur trader highly respected by Omaha Chief Big Elk, married his daughter, Meumbane in 1824 then purchased that post four years later.

During his short lifetime, Fontenelle established a successful career trading along the Missouri. Eventually Fontenelle became the sole owner of the Bellevue post, and led trade caravans from there to the Rendezvous in the Rocky Mountains. Fontenelle sold the Bellevue site in 1832 to the Federal government and the Indian Agency, which oversaw diplomatic relations with tribes along the Upper Missouri. Soon after, he built a second post a half-mile down river.



Karl Bodmer, (Swiss, 1809–93) *The Bellevue Agency, 1833*, watercolor on paper, Gift of Enron Art Foundation 1986, Joslyn Art Museum



Alfred Jacob Miller (American, 1810–74) *Fontenelle Chased by a Grizzly Bear*, n.d., pen and ink and wash on paper, Joslyn Art Museum

Fontenelle's travels put him in contact with both Karl Bodmer and Alfred Jacob Miller. During his trip up the Missouri with Prince Maximilian in 1833–34, Bodmer visited the Bellevue post and sketched Indians and the surrounding landscape. During an 1837 trip to the Rocky Mountains, Fontenelle met Sir William Drummond Stuart and Alfred Jacob Miller at Fort Laramie in Wyoming. Here, Miller sketched the only known representation of Fontenelle as he humorously runs away from a chasing grizzly bear.

Traditional Plains hide clothing — supplely tanned, skillfully made, and often splendidly decorated with paint and quill or beadwork — included robes worn as mantles and generally soft-contoured, loosely fitted dresses, skirts, leggings, and shirts. These tailored garments frequently were sewn specifically for non-Indians: traders, soldiers, and settlers. In 1851 the Swiss artist Rudolph Kurz (1818–1871), while visiting Bellevue and Council Bluffs, was shown "a man's coat and trousers made of white leather and richly embroidered with silk in Indian fashion"; he reported the cost of such garments to be "as much as \$500."

The jacket here is said to have belonged to Logan Fontenelle (1825–1855), a notable figure in Omaha Indian history. His father was Lucien Fontenelle, a prominent French trader, his mother the daughter of Big Elk, a renowned Omaha chief. Educated in St. Louis and fluent in French, English, and Omaha, Fontenelle frequently served as an interpreter. In 1854 he accompanied the delegation of chiefs who signed the government treaty establishing the Omaha reservation in northeast Nebraska. He moved there with his people when they were ordered to leave their village near Bellevue. Fontenelle's pleas for army protection in their new location against possible attack by the Sioux went unheeded; he was killed by a Sioux raiding party while on a hunting expedition in 1855.

A number of stylistic factors make the attribution of ownership of this jacket by Logan Fontenelle less than certain. The beadwork colors and patterns are typical of the Central Plains in the nineteenth century, but 1850–55 could be considered an early date for these, as well as for the short cut of the jacket and for such extensive use of the red cane beads on the shoulder fringe and the small seed beads in the embroidery. However, the son of an active trader may well have developed a keen interest in and had access to new imported goods and styles before they were commonly available, affordable, or popular. More important in considering the connection with Logan Fontenelle is provenance. The jacket was obtained from relatives of Fontenelle in 1914 by a friend of the family, who kept it till 1984, when it was acquired by Joslyn Art Museum.



Artist Unknown (American, Omaha, 19th century) *Jacket*, ca. 1850, hide, beads, silk, and bone, Gift of Wilmoth V. Carpenter in memory of James Franklin Carpenter, Joslyn Art Museum



George Catlin (American, 1796–1872), *Big Elk, a famous warrior*, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum formerly in The AMICO Library

Starting in 1830, artist George Catlin made the first of several trips across the Great Plains, painting the surrounding landscape and over 500 depictions of American Indian life. During his travels, Catlin met with the Omaha tribe, and painted a portrait of Big Elk in his tribal regalia.



George Catlin (American, 1796–1872) *Portrait of Catlin by William Fisk*, n.d., University of California, San Diego



HENRY INMAN (AMERICAN, 1802–1846)
After **CHARLES BIRD KING** (AMERICAN, 1785–1862)

BIG ELK (ONGPATONGA)
1830s, OIL ON CANVAS

JOSLYN ART MUSEUM® OMAHA, NEBRASKA
Museum purchase from the Edward R. Trabold and Lulu H. Trabold Fund with additional funds from the Durham Center for Western Studies Art Endowment Fund, 2011.2