



Smithsonian American Art Museum

May 2012



Bird's-eye View of the Mandan Village, 1800 Miles above St.

Louis

1837-1839

George Catlin

Born: Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania 1796

Died: Jersey City, New Jersey 1872

oil on canvas

24 1/8 x 29 in. (61.2 x 73.6 cm)

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Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr.

1985.66.502

[Collections Webpage and High Resolution Image](#)

Researcher Liz's past experience on an archaeological excavation made her wonder what could be learned about the Mandan village from its remains. She answered the following questions by consulting a number of sources including the artist George Catlin's published journals.

- **Did Catlin accurately depict the Mandan village, and how do we find out what used to be there?**

George Catlin painted *Bird's Eye View of a Mandan Village* in 1837-1839, several years after visiting the village in 1832. Catlin published his "Letters" about his travels in 1841. I was able to find an online edition through [Internet Archive](#). I also wondered if there were any archaeological records of the village that Catlin portrayed. While searching the curatorial file, I came across a book chapter by anthropologist Mark S. Parker Miller that illustrated our painting. Through Miller, I learned of an archaeological excavation in 1986 on the [Fort Clark Historic Site](#) near [Washburn, North Dakota](#) and found the article by archaeologist W. Raymond Wood (cited by Miller).

The village was called Mit-tutta-hang-kush, or Mitu'takhakto, and was occupied by the Mitutanka Mandan from 1822-1837 annually during the spring and summer months. Mit-tutta-hang-kush was 300 yards from the "Fort Clark" trading post, where the Mandan people traded fur pelts with white settlers. A smallpox epidemic in 1837-1838 decimated the village of Mit-tutta-hang-kush. Those who survived left the village and a group from the Arikara nation, (another related Plains people) moved in.

It is still possible to see the outlines of the lodges of Mit-tutta-hang-kush in an aerial photograph on the [Fort Clark homepage](#). As I learned while participating in an archaeological program and excavations in Italy, aerial photography can serve as a useful tool in mapping archaeological sites. Traces of past settlements can be seen from the air as ghostly outlines. This is due to the fact that the ground directly beneath structures absorbs less water than the surrounding areas. I found aerial photographs of historical Three Tribes (Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara) village sites by searching an interactive timeline on the [Plains People of the Upper Missouri](#) website (State Historical Society of North Dakota).

You can view a map of the [Mandan village archaeological site](#) on the Fort Clark website. Wood and his team discovered a ditch surrounding the main part of the village with remains of a palisade or piquet fence inside, confirming Catlin's observation that the village was surrounded "by a strong piquet, and a ditch inside of it, of three to four feet in depth." (Letters, I, 81). The palisade is also visible in the middle-ground of *Bird's Eye View* and in another Catlin painting in our collection, [Back View of Mandan Village, Showing the Cemetery](#).

The archaeologists found remains of a burial site southwest of the village beyond the palisade. Sure enough, if you look at Catlin's painting, you can see that he represented grave scaffoldings in the distant background. The archaeologists mapped 86 lodges, 67 within the palisade and thirteen beyond. Catlin depicted 36 lodges in his painting, all within the palisade. Wood believes that the thirteen houses beyond the palisade were built by the Arikara and therefore these structures are absent in the painting.

The excavation also revealed that the Arikara Indians built a new medicine lodge (marked with a cross symbol on the [map](#)) in the middle of the plaza where the ark or "Big Canoe" (the wooden barrel-like structure in Catlin's painting) once stood. The Minnesota Historical Society has an image of an [ark from a Mandan site](#) on its image database. House 1 on the map coincides with the original location of the Mandan medicine lodge (visible in the foreground of *Bird's Eye View*).

Oral history can also help in the "reconstruction" of historic places. In 1906 or 1907, Bad Gun, Rushing War Eagle, the son of [Chief Mah-toh-to-pa](#) (whom Catlin painted in 1832), told an anthropologist, Orin Libby, that his father had once lived in the lodge immediately east of the

medicine lodge. Wood identified Mah-toh-to-pa's lodge as House 2 on the map. I found an image of [Bad Gun](#) on the [North Dakota Studies](#) website.

If you compare Catlin's painting to the archaeological site map of Mit-tutta-hang-kush, Catlin's houses correspond closely to the lodge outlines on the map. Mah-toh-to-pa's lodge therefore can be identified in the painting as the one to the left of the medicine lodge! In summary, the archaeological findings confirm that Catlin accurately recorded Mit-tutta-hang-kush with his brush.

- **There are four “effigy poles” in front of the entrance to the medicine lodge. Why is one of the effigies white in color?**

In Letter 19 (Vol. 1, 133-134) Catlin mentions the Mandan Indians' custom of placing “scare crows” or effigies on 30-foot poles at the entrance to the medicine lodge. Catlin described the effigies as being made “of ten or fifteen yards of blue and black cloth each ... up so as to resemble human figures, with quills in their heads and masks on their faces.” Catlin also observed that the white effigy is made from the skin of a very rare white buffalo or bison. The odds of finding a white bison were perhaps 1 in 100,000. Because of this rarity, many Plains peoples consider the white bison sacred. I read a story online about the tragic killing of a white bison calf, [Lightning Medicine Cloud](#), born on a Texas ranch belonging to a Lakota Sioux family. The Lakota community mourns the bison's death and is trying to find the killers.

Catlin reports that the Mandan traded with the Comanche Indians for a white buffalo skin which was then placed atop a pole and “sacrificed” to the elements along with the cloth effigies. In a book by Colin Taylor, I found the effigy poles documented in Catlin's watercolors illustrating a manuscript in the [British Museum](#), the artist's eyewitness account of the Mandan's annual O-kee-pa ceremony. Taylor also reproduces a 1910 photograph of Mandan effigies outside a house at the Fort Berthold reservation (Minnesota State Historical Society).

- **What is the significance of the cattle skulls and the round objects on the roofs of the lodges?**

The skulls are not of cattle, but of bison. In Letter 12 (I, 88), Catlin mentions that "On the roofs of the lodges ... are buffalos' skulls, skin canoes, pots and pottery; sleds and sledges." The Mandan relied heavily on the bison for food and clothing. They performed the “Bel-lohck-na-pic” or bull-dance at the O-kee-pa ceremony to ensure good hunting for the coming season (Taylor). The round object on the roof of the medicine lodge in the foreground is a skin canoe or "bull boat," a portable watercraft made from bison skin stretched upon a wooden frame (Miller, 304). I found a photograph of a bull boat on the website of the [Minnesota Historical Society](#).

I still have some questions, especially what are the significance of the white horse and dog in the center of the village, and are they connected to the O-kee-pa ceremony?

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