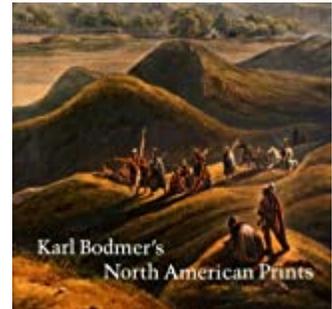




Brandon K. Ruud, ed. *Karl Bodmer's North American Prints*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. xi + 382 pp. \$150.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-1326-5.



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Producing Transnational Images

From 1832-1834, Prince Maximilian von Wied, accompanied by the artist Karl Bodmer, traveled from Boston to St. Louis, up the Missouri river to Fort McKenzie in Montana, and then back along the Missouri and Ohio rivers to New York City. The goal of their odyssey was to visit Native Americans in the areas still unsettled by the United States and record, in exacting scientific detail, everything they could. The result was von Wied's famous travel account and Bodmer's lavish illustrations of North American landscapes and inhabitants.[1] Wied's account of the trip has received much attention from scholars interested in European travel narratives,[2] but Bodmer's illustrations have gained an almost hegemonic position in the iconography of Plains Indians. Perhaps only George Catlin's drawings and paintings have had greater circulation. One can find Bodmer's images (as drawings, watercolors, etchings, and prints) in museums and libraries across Europe and the United States, and they have been reproduced both legally and illicitly in a range of books, periodicals, prints, posters, and calendars. Most of the readers of this list would recognize one or another of these images even if they have no knowledge of Bodmer and little interest in Native Americans.

Although it has seen less attention, the history of these images is as instructive for scholars as the scheme that produced them. If the trip is characteristic of the transnational ventures of several generations of Germans who sought to emulate Alexander von Humboldt by traveling abroad, so too was the production of their two-volume narrative and the completion of Bodmer's atlas. Just as Humboldt returned to Paris to write up his work, the Swiss artist Bodmer turned to French engravers in Paris to help complete the illustrations for his German patron's volumes, which were published in German, French, and English editions. The originals, along with some of the ethnological collections, found their way into major international art and scientific institutions, and in 1962, much of this material (nearly four hundred drawings and watercolors by Bodmer, a collection of books, and a good deal of correspondence between Wied, Bodmer, and others) returned to the Midwest when it became the property of the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, Nebraska.

Brandon K. Ruud has produced an impressive volume that takes the Joslyn collection as a starting point for exploring the history of the eighty-one atlas prints

Bodmer created for Wied's narrative. The volume includes a useful introduction to the trip by Ron Tyler and an essay about the history of Bodmer's prints by Ruud. These essays explain what becomes vividly clear in the rest of the book: the plates took shape over a long period of time (some eight years after the journey itself) and many of them went through multiple revisions. The process of revision is fascinating. Many of the images that have become regarded as authoritative snapshots of different groups of Indians are actually compilations—scenes put together by Bodmer in his Paris studio from multiple sketches, or at times from memory alone. His plates were influenced by his patron, his publisher, his initial audience, and by the hands of the many craftsmen who produced the engravings. Wied remained in close contact with Bodmer during the production, approving and disapproving even minute changes to the plates. He was particularly critical of ethnographic details, but he was also interested in the aesthetics of the plates, making a point to exclude European artifacts and clothing from most of the portraits of Indians and insisting on landscapes and individuals that were pleasing to the eye—a point he became keenly concerned with after a rather bad review of Bodmer's paintings at the 1836 Paris Exposition.

Once completed, the plates also took on lives of their own, circulating in periodicals and books that are discussed by Tyler but also listed in detail in appendix D. Indeed, the details of each plate make up the majority of the book, which includes photographs of the illustrations (original water colors, sketches, engravings, and initial and final printings) that were used to produce the plates. The research involved in pulling together the extant illustrations from institutions scattered across the United States and Europe (listed in appendices A and B) must have been daunting. But the final product is breathtaking. This is a treasure trove for art historians, filled with meticulous detail, including even short biographies of engravers involved in the production. But it is also of great value to the layman who, after reading through the forty-eight tableaus and thirty-three vignettes, could not help but come away with a sobering respect for the physical and mental energies that went into producing the atlas.

That, in fact, would be a useful exercise for students in general. One could imagine using a half dozen or more of these examples in the classroom as a means for stimulating discussions about notions of authenticity, the production, reception, and consumption of science and art in the nineteenth century, and the transnational character of the social lives of the original paintings, the plates, the books, and the images.

Although their rigorous efforts prolonged their project much more than either man could have anticipated, and resulted in a volume of prohibitive expense (\$120, or roughly \$2,856 today), Wied's commitment to science and Bodmer's dedication to art produced what Alexander von Humboldt regarded as one of the best volumes of its kind. Humboldt wrote to Wied, "there is no other travel-book written in our language, which might be compared with this publication that is so perfect in all its details." Impressed with Wied's ethnography, Humboldt also regarded Bodmer's plates as peerless. He wrote that he could not "find anything like [them] in other literary achievements, with regard to beauty and reality.... How poor are the recent books of the French about travels around the world, which had been published at the expense of the government," compared to this book, which had the financial support of Wied alone (pp. 20-21). Indeed, this was one of the last volumes of its kind. Even as they were producing the atlas, Bodmer recognized the potential of early photography and the cheap printing houses that were beginning to produce nickel and dime literature, and he realized that his efforts were already becoming outdated. There is, however, a quality to these volumes that requires us to agree with Humboldt's assessment, something that Ruud and his colleagues have made palpable with their book.

Notes

[1]. Maximilian von Wied and Karl Bodmer, *Reise in das innere Nord-America in den Jahren 1832 bis 1834*, 2 vols. (Coblenz: J. Hoelscher, 1839).

[2]. Most recently: Harry Liebersohn, *Aristocratic Encounters: European Travelers and North American Indians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

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