Plains Geometry

Surveying the Path from Savagery to Civilization

William H. Truettner

Separated by almost fifty years, George Catlin's Mandan Village *and William Fuller's* Crow Creek Agency *show Plains Indians in very different physical circumstances. But the two paintings also reveal that over this interval white attitudes toward Indians had radically changed. That change, the author argues, may be registered more tellingly in the form and structure of each painting than in their respective subjects. Catlin's painting, dominated by circular motifs, appears to describe a "primitive" cosmology (the past), while Fuller's, composed on a grid pattern, takes a different direction, advocating civilization and progress (the future).*

ONE OF MANY WAYS we measure and understand the Great Plains today is through the grid plan, imposed on it by a series of federal and state surveys that began during the Jefferson administration and continued through much of the nineteenth century. Driving these surveys was, of course, the need for more and more arable land to accommodate those moving west, especially during and after the Civil War when Great Plains settlement began in earnest. The gradual subordination of the plains, or, for that matter, much of the trans-Mississippi West, to a new spatial order was not, however, generally recognized by major landscape painters of the period. As a result, we are more accustomed to seeing the nineteenth-century West as a place that existed on the far side of some imaginary frontier—a vast natural preserve of plains and mountains that stretched as far as the eye could see. But there were exceptions. The first generation of white painters who went west, notably George Catlin, Carl Bodmer, and Alfred Jacob Miller, often observed and recorded Indian villages located on or near sites that figured prominently in the fur trade or on major transportation routes—the trails and rivers used by explorers.

One such village, the home of the Mandan tribe, located on a bend of the Upper Missouri River in present-day North Dakota, was visited by George Catlin in 1832. Five years later, from memory and perhaps from onsite sketches, the village became the subject of one of his most striking paintings. Almost fifty years later, after the Great Plains were more or less settled, an artist named William Fuller painted another village, this one on an Indian reservation located in present-day South Dakota, several hundred miles downriver from the Mandan village. The purpose of this study is to compare these two works, on the assumption that their compositions—Catlin's based on circular motifs, Fuller's on a grid plan of rectangles and diagonals—reveal a kind of "cultural geometry," enabling us to read across this fifty-year period radical changes in white attitudes toward Great Plains tribes. I will begin with the current history of each painting, then turn back to consider how each represents the time and place in which it was created.

When *Crow Creek Agency, Dakota Territory*, painted by agency carpenter Fuller in 1884, was offered for sale by a New York dealer in June 1969, it was described in the dealer's sale catalogue as

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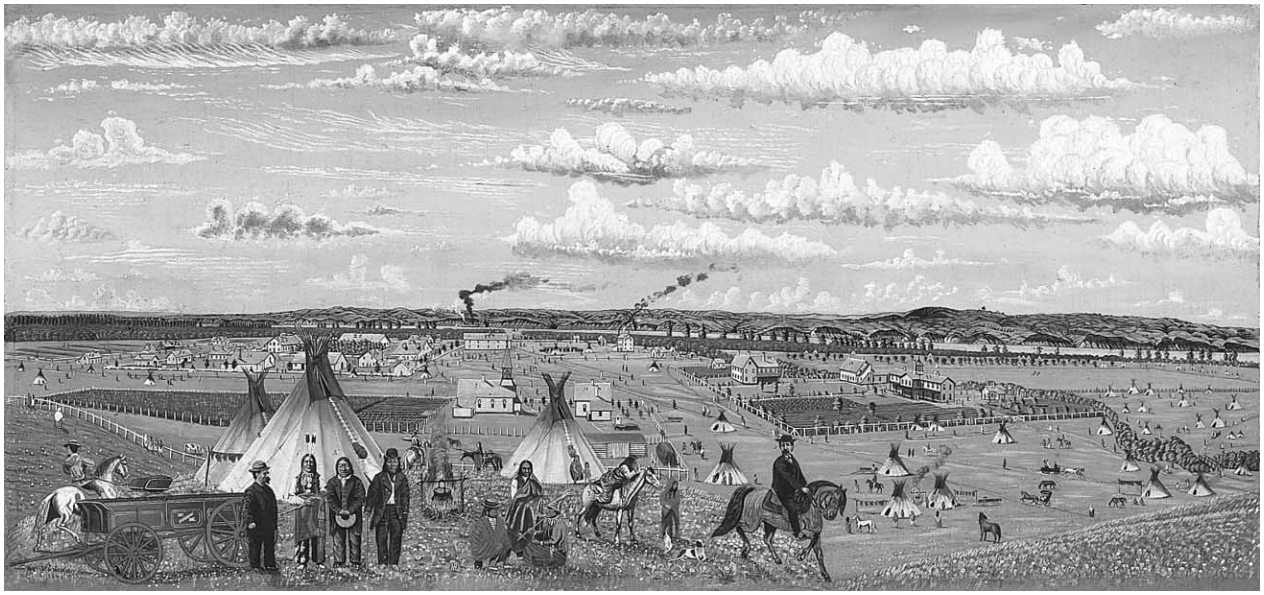

Fig. 1. William Fuller, *Crow Creek Agency, Dakota Territory*, 1884. Oil on canvas; H. 26⅝″, W. 51¾″. (Amon Carter Museum, Forth Worth, Texas, Acquisition in Memory of René d'Harnoncourt, Trustee, Amon Carter Museum, 1961–68.)

both a "primitive painting" and "one of the very few pictorial records of an Indian reservation in the nineteenth century that we have seen" (fig. 1). The entry notes that the figures and buildings appearing in the picture, plotted in map-like formation across the reservation grounds, are all identified on a key written across the back of the canvas. In addition, we are told, the picture shows the countryside in early spring, "before the hot sun and droughts of June, July, and August dried up the fresh green grass that followed the melting of winter snows."[1] This last statement gives us the first (and only) hint of a selective artistic vision. The entry then changes tone with a fairly strong condemnation of the reservation system (both whites and Indians are blamed) and a specific reference to the unhealthy and depressing conditions that persisted at Crow Creek Agency. No attempt is made, in the process, to explain why the neat, energetic, and seemingly prosperous appearance of the agency is so at odds with the problems it was undergoing, perhaps in the very year the picture was painted.

And yet, it is only fair to admit that few would have thought to examine a primitive or folk painting in the 1960s with that idea in mind. More common was the approach taken by the author of the catalogue entry, who implies that despite the seasonal coloring of the landscape the picture is a substantially accurate view of the agency. Shortly after *Crow Creek Agency* was advertised in the dealer's catalogue, a group of patrons associated with the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, purchased the painting and gave it to the museum. The gift was made in memory of René d'Harnoncourt, the recently deceased director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, who had for many years been a board member of the Amon Carter Museum. How d'Harnoncourt came to be honored by such a gift is less surprising than one might think. During the time he was associated with the Museum of Modern Art, he helped stage a number of "primitive" art shows, including *Indian Art of the United States* (1941), the most important survey of Indian arts and crafts held in this country up to that time. The show may have also provided d'Harnoncourt with an opportunity to pay tribute to the native people he had met and become close to during several decades of travel in Mexico and in the American West. Folk art was another of d'Harnoncourt's interests, one that he had picked up early in his career, in Austria, where he was

[1] *The Kennedy Quarterly* 9 (June 1969): 25. During the artist's lifetime, the painting hung at agency headquarters in Fort Thompson. Then it must have passed to his daughter, Matilda Fuller, who died in 1965. The executors of her estate, Dorothy Fuller Bredlow and Robert L. Fuller (her niece and nephew), probably sold it to Kennedy Galleries. This tentative provenance is based on an annotated copy of Jan M. Dykshorn, "William Fuller's Crow Creek and Lower Brule Paintings," *South Dakota History* 6 (Fall 1976): 411–20; see also Roscoe E. Dean, "The Story of the Crow Creek Agency Picture," February 22, 1972; both are in the curatorial files at the Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Tex.

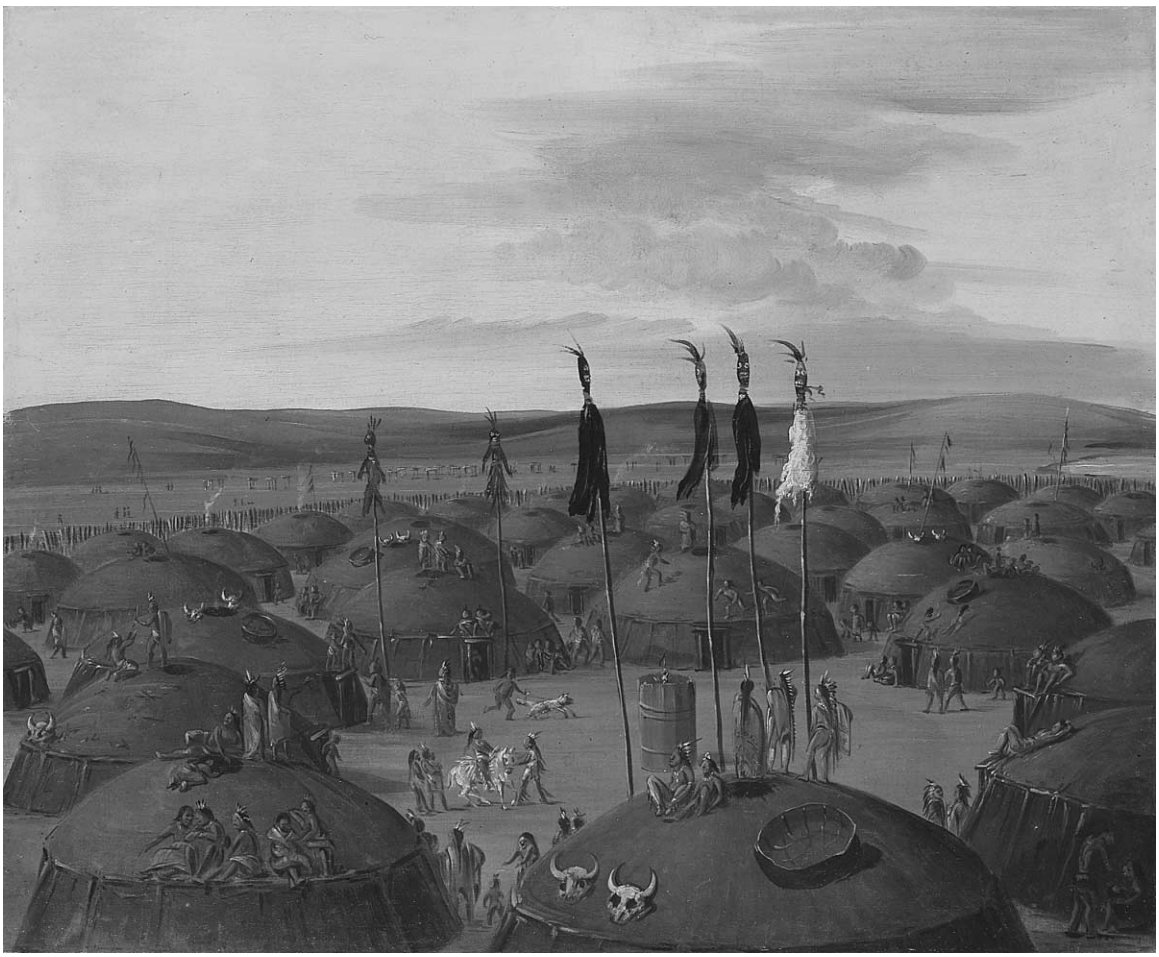

Fig. 2. George Catlin, *Bird's-Eye View of the Mandan Village, 1800 Miles above St. Louis*, 1837–39. Oil on canvas; H. 24⅛″, W. 29″. (Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr.)

born, and in Mexico, where he lived as a young man. By the 1930s, he was probably following the folk art revival in New York—at Edith Halpert's American Folk Art Gallery (which opened in 1931), at other commercial galleries, and at museums. The Newark Museum led the way with Holger Cahill's *American Primitives: An Exhibit of the Paintings of Nineteenth-Century Folk Artists* (1930) and *American Folk Sculpture: The Work of Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Craftsmen* (1931); the Museum of Modern Art followed with *Art of the Common Man* (1932), *Sources of Modern Art* (1933), and *Masters of Popular Painting* (1938).[2] One would guess, then, that *Crow Creek Agency* was a well-directed tribute to d'Harnoncourt's tastes and interests—the painting would have appealed to him in a variety of ways.

Just how to characterize Catlin's much earlier painting, *Bird's-Eye View of the Mandan Village* (fig. 2) is not altogether clear. His work during the 1830s when he was traveling intermittently across the Great Plains seems to veer back and forth between efforts to demonstrate his considerable artistic skill and hasty, sometimes crude, stints of ethnographic record-making. But back in the 1960s when *Mandan Village* came to the National Museum of American Art (now the Smithsonian American Art Museum) from another Smithsonian bureau, some might have understood it to be related to *Crow Creek Agency*. Both pictures are, after all, about the domestic circumstances of Indian life in the West, the latter an update of the former. And both are by relatively untrained artists. Had *Mandan*

[2] See *René d'Harnoncourt, 1901–1968: A Tribute,* October 8, 1968 (Sculpture Garden, Museum of Modern Art, New York). For more information on folk art activities of this period, see Beatrix T. Rumford, "Uncommon Art of the Common People: A Review of Trends in the Collecting and Exhibiting of American Folk Art," in Ian M. G. Quimby and Scott T. Swank, eds., *Perspectives on American Folk Art* (Winterthur, Del.: Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1980), pp. 13–53.

Village been up for sale in the 1960s, it would probably also have been considered "primitive." (Indeed, an employee of the same New York gallery that sold *Crow Creek Agency* had a decade earlier described a group of Catlin paintings shown at the gallery as "primitive, direct, impressionistic.")[3] To be sure, Catlin aspired to a higher goal as a painter and sometimes reached it. And Fuller may have also wished to climb the artistic ladder. Still, the term "primitive" did serve to enhance the reputations of both artists during the 1950s and 1960s.

One could even go further, arguing that the combination of subject *and* style may have helped both paintings find their way to prominent collections in the 1960s. Those of us who were curating or collecting in that decade remember it as a time of rapidly expanding interest in American art. That trend, fostered by a newly emergent Cold War patriotism and the flush of oil money that suddenly came into the hands of western natural resource "pioneers," gave a considerable boost to the western art market. But the special attraction of these two paintings was their air of authenticity—the look, the details, the idea they conveyed of an artist either working on location or from reliable sources. By this time (in fact, several decades earlier), scholars and collectors in the field had all but agreed that this was one of the most important and admired aspects of western image-making. How was this "air of authenticity" acquired? One way, of course, was through a first-hand knowledge of the subject. Catlin, for example, had spent almost a month at Mandan Village in the summer of 1832 observing and painting subjects that few white men had ever seen before. And Fuller was the carpenter at Crow Creek Agency when he painted the striking diagrammatic view of the agency's principal residents, buildings, and grounds. On-the-spot reporting and/or locating reliable sources were not the only routes to authenticity, however; it was also a function of style. Frederic Remington had achieved a reputation as a truthful observer of the Old West because of the carefully drawn period detail he included in his paintings. Catlin and Fuller were on a different stylistic wavelength, one that seemingly fell short of Remington's academic rigor and detailed representation of artifacts but nonetheless had other truth-telling virtues closely aligned with the formalist and avant-garde critical standards of the 1950s and 1960s. Like many so-called primitive painters, past and present, their work was presumed to embody "true artistic quality," broadly defined in this case as the outward visual evidence of the raw inborn talent of the maker; and "artistic innocence," again broadly defined as the kind of creative resourcefulness usually associated with the work of self-taught artists and artisans. Despite sometimes rich detailing, folk paintings also leaned toward abstraction, toward bold and simple patterns that allied them with modernism. Which, in turn, raised a few of these paintings to the status of the works produced by leading mainstream artists.[4]

Truth-telling went hand in hand with the rapidly increasing status of folk art. From the 1930s on, scholars and critics had been arguing that a lack of formal training enabled these artists to observe their subjects with a more intense and original eye, an eye that naturally reduced the complexity of those subjects to a telling abstract design.[5] Art was achieved, in other words, not as a conscious strategy but because Catlin and Fuller were incapable of transferring to canvas how the eye actually records appearances. Not that this counted against them. For if these artists lacked a certain professional advantage, they were also less capable of artistic deceit, of obscuring what was essential in a particular scene. The earth lodges in Catlin's picture, for example, clustered around the circular space at the center of the village, appear to complement the leisurely, uninhibited socializing of the Mandans. This made the picture a more believable account of Mandan life. The pronounced grid pattern in the Fuller picture,

[3] *George Catlin (1796–1872), American Indians: Paintings from the Collection of the American Museum of Natural History*, exhibition catalogue, Kennedy Galleries, New York, 1956.

[4] Typical examples of the "authentic" approach are Albert Christ-Janer's *George Caleb Bingham of Missouri* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1940); and Perry T. Rathbone, ed., *Westward the Way* (Saint Louis: City Art Museum of Saint Louis, 1954); the latter is perhaps the most sustained effort in western art studies to match "eyewitness" texts with images "documenting" western life and landscape. On "true artistic quality" and "artistic innocence," see Jean Lipman and Alice Winchester, eds., *Primitive Painters in America, 1750–1950* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1950), p. 2; see also Holger Cahill et al., *Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1938), pp. 96, 104–5. On folk painting and modernism, see Mary Black and Jean Lipman, *American Folk Painting* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1966), p. viii.

[5] Cahill et al., *Masters of Popular Painting*, p. 101; see also Eugene W. Metcalf Jr. and Claudine Weatherford, "Modernism, Edith Halpert, Holger Cahill, and the Fine Art Meaning of American Folk Art," in Jane S. Becker and Barbara Franco, eds., *Folk Roots, New Roots: Folklore in American Life* (Lexington, Mass.: Museum of Our National Heritage, 1988), pp. 141–66; and Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), pp. 251–71.

dictated by the shape and arrangement of the agency buildings, gives an orderly look to agency activities—a look that Fuller's contemporaries may have seen as representing accurately the social purpose of agency programs. Like the old stories about children and drunks, naive artists were compelled to tell a simple truth.

Anthropologists, historians, and lay observers, although never openly acknowledging the implied narrative in each picture, have been only too willing to accept the general accuracy of both pictures. "From a position atop one of the earth-covered dwellings," a noted Smithsonian anthropologist wrote in 1965, Catlin "managed to show the greater part of the town of more than a thousand inhabitants, its palisade, the circular ceremonial structure in the center of the closely grouped houses, and the scarecrow-like sacrificial poles topped with human effigies of trade cloth." More recently, *Crow Creek Agency* has been called an "accurate, colorful documentation of reservation life in the nineteenth century." By now, most readers have probably wondered if either painting could be called an accurate account of its respective subject. But if that is the case, at least a few may think that what intervenes between image and reality is artistic license. Catlin and Fuller have each adjusted what they saw in order to make a more pleasing picture. No doubt that is true. But to carry the argument a step further, one could claim that both scenes are programmed to advocate a fixed set of ideas and values—an ideology, in other words, that becomes naturalized as a perfectly unexceptional byproduct of the way a work is composed and painted. T. J. Clark argues that this enables us to perceive a pattern that unites imagery and belief, or, in his words, "a set of permitted modes of saying and seeing; each with its own structure of closure and disclosure." These, in turn, have a way of making certain perceptions seem inevitable while "rendering others unthinkable, aberrant, or extreme."[6] Applying Clark's theorizing to this particular situation helps us understand why, when investigating the work of artists such as Catlin and Fuller, their cultural predispositions cannot be lightly set aside. Indeed, one can assume that it would have been difficult for either artist, when painting pictures such as *Crow Creek Agency* and *Mandan Village*, not to reveal something about his attitude toward Indian life.

Precedents for paintings such as *Mandan Village* are difficult to find in earlier western art; Catlin justifiably gets credit for inventing much of the iconography that appears in his "Indian Gallery." But with some stretch of the imagination, certain English rural scenes, painted in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, can be seen as a source for the more typical genre passages in *Mandan Village*. Take David Wilkie's *Village Holiday* of 1814 (fig. 3), for example—a painting in turn drawn from the work of seventeenth-century Dutch masters, such as David Teniers and Adriaen van Ostade. Although based on a scene in the London suburbs, *The Village Holiday* was made to fulfill a prevailing image of English peasant life, crude and rustic in its way but also vigorous, lusty, and firmly rooted in a bountiful, non-urban environment.[7] At first glance, both *The Village Holiday* and *Mandan Village* represent the joys of rural (or wilderness) life, of people who live in small villages adequately supplied by the surrounding countryside. Their daily routines are portrayed as simple and fulfilling—noticeably free of the burdens that attend life in towns and cities. But except in paintings, rural life in England was rarely as idyllic as Wilkie makes it out to be. His pictures look the way they do because they were meant to recast the lot of the rural poor into a convenient, stable social order, suitable for framing on the walls of prosperous middle-class urban patrons. Built into this process, of course, was an implied distinction—a distance between patrons and subjects that assumed the former were superior to the latter and therefore able to draw the distinction to their own advantage. But there was also a gloss of understanding, even of longing, that appeared to cross the social distance between the two groups, sometimes drawing them together, or at least softening the hearts of urban dwellers toward what they perceived or remembered as a more carefree, wholesome existence. In either case, the result was similar; the countryside came to be pictured as a place of innocent pastimes—occasionally a bit rowdy, but never out of control. Thus the aim in life of those who appear in the Wilkie painting could be described in the following

[6] John C. Ewers, *Artists of the Old West* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 80. For a more recent quotation, see Dykshorn, "William Fuller's Crow Creek," p. 420. T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (New York: Knopf, 1985), p. 8.

[7] H. A. D. Miles and David Blayney Brown, *Sir David Wilkie of Scotland (1785–1841)* (Raleigh: North Carolina Museum of Art, 1987), pp. 9–10. On another level, *The Village Holiday* is a moralizing tale about a drunken husband unable to decide between another cup of ale and his domestic obligations.

Fig. 3. Sir David Wilkie, *The Village Holiday,* 1809–11. Oil on canvas; H. 37″, W. 50¼″. (Tate Gallery, London/Art Resource, NY.)

way: "They live in a country and in communities, where it is *not* customary to look forward into the future with concern, for they live without incurring the expenses of life, which are absolutely necessary and unavoidable in the enlightened world; and of course their inclinations and faculties are solely directed to the enjoyment of the present day, *without* the sober reflections on the past or apprehensions of the future." The passage I have just quoted is not from Wilkie literature, however; as some may have already guessed. It was taken from a letter Catlin wrote in 1832 describing the droll figures he had encountered in and around Mandan Village. "They are fond of fun and good cheer," he continued, "and can laugh easily and heartily at a slight joke, of which their peculiar modes of life furnish them an inexhaustible fund, and enable them to cheer their little circle about the wigwam fire-side with endless laughter and garrulity."[8]

Before we conclude that Wilkie's rural types and Catlin's Mandans were indeed simple primitives, unconcerned with life beyond their respective doorsteps, we might recall that many rural laborers in England during the early nineteenth century were in fact not living idyllic lives. The Enclosure Acts of the previous century had considerably reduced the amount of common land available to them, undermining an already marginal livelihood. The Mandans had problems of a different kind. Several years before Catlin painted this scene, their village had been decimated by a smallpox epidemic brought up the Missouri River by white fur traders. So the apparent domestic tranquility of each picture can be assumed to obscure conditions and events of which English rural folk and post-epidemic Mandans were, respectively, all too aware.[9]

Artistic precedents for *Crow Creek Agency* are also available. Surely Fuller's painting descends from earlier views of fur trading and military forts, each incorporating a topographical perspective, by artists such as Catlin, Alfred Jacob Miller, and Carl

[8] George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians,* 2 vols. (1841; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1973), 1:85.

[9] On the Enclosure Acts, see Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); see also John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in*

Fig. 4. George Catlin, *Fort Union, Mouth of the Yellowstone River, 2000 Miles above St. Louis,* 1832. Oil on canvas; H. 11¼″, W. 14⅜″. (Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr.)

Wimar. Catlin's early view of Fort Union, an American fur company outpost located at the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers, shows the fort surrounded on three sides by the tepees of the Upper Missouri tribes that had come to trade furs for domestic items manufactured by whites (fig. 4). Although described by Catlin as "a very substantial fort, 300 feet square, with bastions armed with ordnance," conveying the appearance of size and power does not appear to be the artist's primary consideration. Instead, the fort is represented as a useful contact point, a place for mediating between two cultures. Peace reigns, therefore, across the broad panorama; the tepees are widely spaced around the fort in groups that sometimes amount to rows but that lack any sign of menace, and the Missouri River provides a calm backdrop for the entire scene. Miller's view of the interior of Fort Laramie, first seen on his trip west with Scotsman William Drummond Stewart in 1837, provides a different impression of one of these fur trading posts (fig. 5). Looking past two Indians in the foreground who are observing the same scene, we run directly into the high defensive walls surrounding the open space inside the fort, where groups of Indians, in the shadow of those walls, are casually subjected to the authority of the white fur trading establishment.[10]

English Painting, 1730–1840 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1980). Before the arrival of Lewis and Clark in 1804, the Mandan population had been considerably reduced by a smallpox epidemic; another struck in 1837 (5 years after Catlin's visit), all but wiping out the village. Catlin's scene, based on observation and memory, was painted between 1837 and 1839, most likely after the artist had heard reports of the second epidemic; William H. Truettner, *The Natural Man Observed: A Study of Catlin's Indian Gallery* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979), p. 297. Instead, Catlin represented, without comment, the village he had seen in 1832. Not until 1848 did the artist acknowledge that very few Mandan remained; George Catlin, *A Descriptive Catalogue of Catlin's Indian Collection* (London: By the author, 1848), p. 46.

[10] Catlin's description of Fort Union is taken from Catlin, *Letters and Notes,*1:14. For more on Miller, his patron Stewart, and their association with white fur traders, see Ron Tyler, ed., *Alfred Jacob Miller: Artist on the Oregon Trail* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Amon Carter Museum, 1982), esp. pp. 27–32; and Lisa Strong, "Images of Indigenous Aristocracy in Alfred Jacob Miller," *American Art* 13 (Spring 1999): 62–83.

Fig. 5. Alfred Jacob Miller, *Interior of Fort Laramie*, 1837. Watercolor, H. 10⅝″, W. 14⅛″. (Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, Tulsa.)

Next in sequence is a superbly detailed drawing of Fort Pierre, located several hundred miles downriver from Fort Union, done by Frederick Behman, an employee of the American Fur Company (fig. 6). Behman's drawing goes a step further, promoting the fort (which the American Fur Company sold to the government in 1855) as a kind of diplomatic mission in Indian country. No less than three American flags fly above the ramparts. Down below, whites and Indians carry on their daily routines in separate spaces. The white world, neatly defined within the walls, is the seat of power to which all roads and major support activities are directed; the Indians are encamped on the surrounding plain, engaged in domestic pursuits and games. Despite the difference between the "serious" occupations of the whites and the "primitive" ways of the Indians, the two races seem destined to cooperate and to coexist. One final image, a large, impressive oil by Carl Wimar of Indians approaching Fort Union, adds a new note to this series (fig. 7). In full regalia, the group appears on a bluff above the fort, their travois loaded with furs to be exchanged for trade goods. But the lurid sunset and the heavy air of nostalgia that hangs over the scene suggests that the Indians have embarked on a mission more significant than a seasonal visit. It seems to represent instead a closing act—a notice that fur trading as a way of life has all but come to an end (which indeed it had by this time).[11] In response, the role of the fort shifts even further toward accommodation. Set in a spacious Missouri River landscape, its picturesque contours bathed in warm evening light, the fort begins to look more like a refuge than a military outpost. The Indians stop to observe it from above, some defiant, shooting rifles, other appearing more resigned, even hopeful. And yet, whatever their

[11] For a brief background on the Behman watercolor, see John C. Ewers, *Plains Indian History and Culture: Essays on Continuity and Change* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), pp. 160–65. On the Wimar painting, see Rick Stewart et al., *Carl Wimar: Chronicler of the Missouri Frontier* (Fort Worth, Texas: Amon Carter Museum, 1991), pp. 155–56. Fort Union, Stewart notes, was "ordered abandoned within a year after Wimar painted his homage to it." The decline of the fur trade had, in fact, begun in the late 1830s, when beaver hats went out of fashion in Europe, but the market for other furs continued on into the 1840s and 1850s; see Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, *The American West: A New Interpretive History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 156–58.

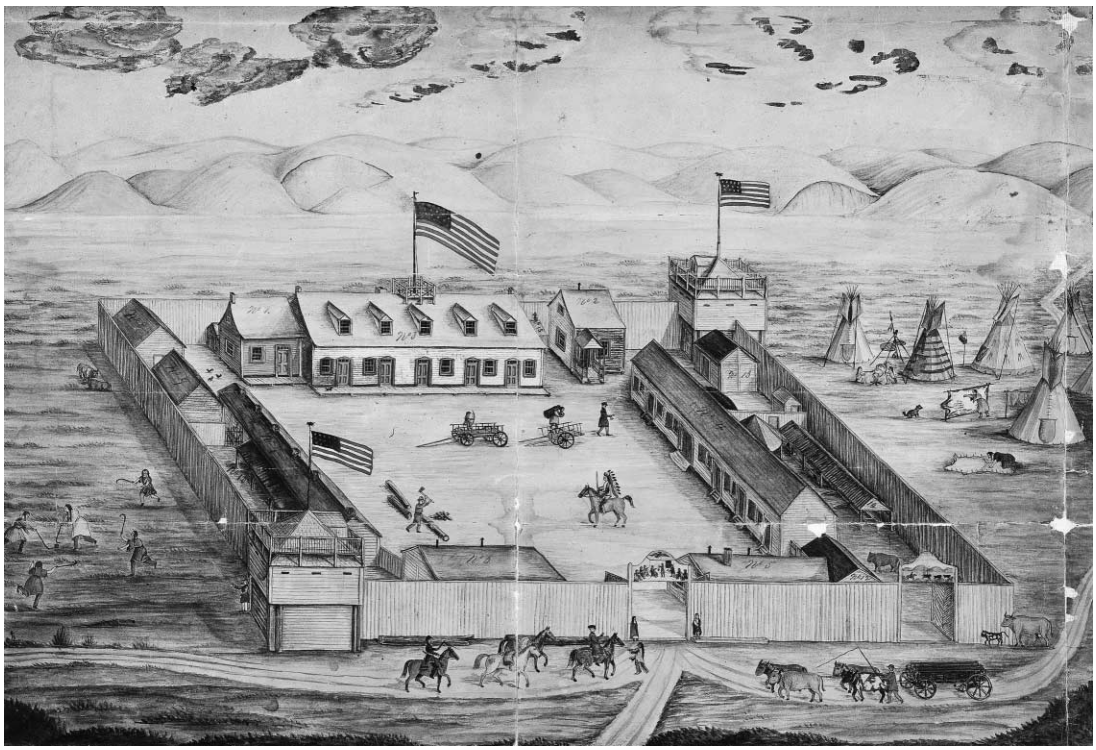

Fig. 6. Frederick Behman, *View of Fort Pierre*, 1855 or earlier. Watercolor; H. 13⅛″, W. 17⅝″. (National Archives and Record Service, Washington, D.C.)

mood, fate seems to have overtaken them. Literally, if one considers that behind them is the viewer, presumably a white patron, whose gaze seems to overleap the Indians, the fort, and the river to concentrate on the broad expanse of country beyond.

The final step is the pictorial transformation of the fort into an agency or reservation, a place to receive beleaguered tribes. But before following that lead, we should revisit *Mandan Village,* noting the formal differences between that picture and *Crow Creek Agency*. Working out from the

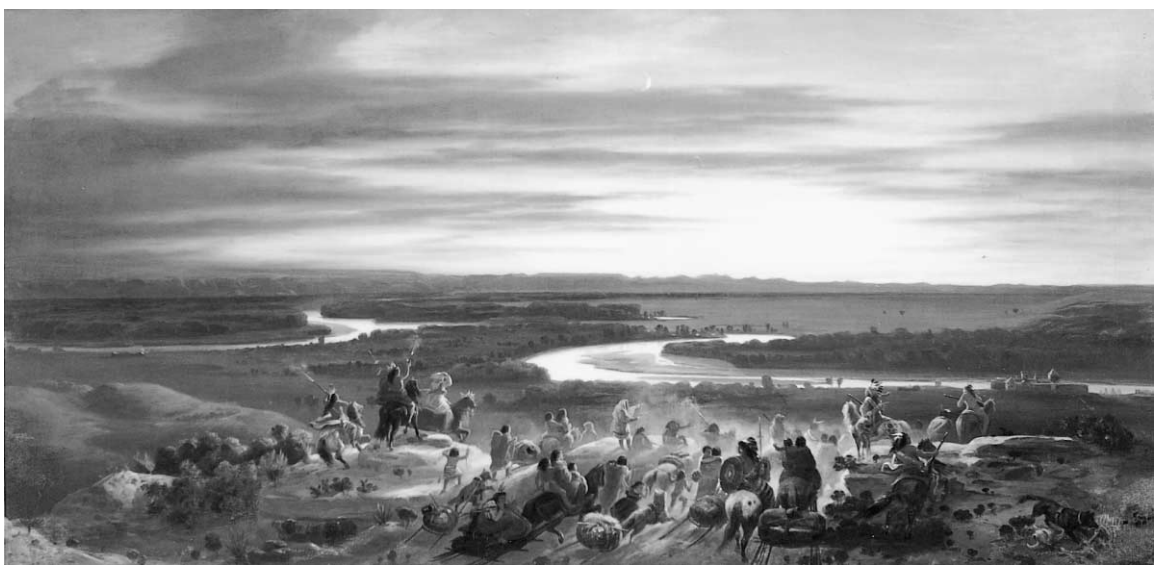

Fig. 7. Carl F. Wimar, *Indians Approaching Fort Union*, ca. 1859. Oil on canvas; H. 24⅛″, W. 48½″. (Washington University Gallery of Art, Saint Louis. Gift of Dr. William Van Zandt, 1886.)

ceremonial structure at the center of the composition to the lodges, the pickets surrounding the village, and the ring of hills in the background, leads one to see the picture as a series of expanding circles. To some extent, the artist was following an apparent pattern in the layout of the village, but naturalist John Audubon, on a trip up the Missouri in 1843, observed that Catlin had greatly improved on the regularity of the shapes and sizes of the Mandan lodges. To Audubon's eye, the village was a much less formal collection of mud huts, not nearly so "poetical" in appearance. If that is the case, why did Catlin, in effect, round them out? Was it to play up the relationship of their forms to the surrounding space, to make of the whole composition something rhythmic and poetical? And did he believe that the repeated circular motif had a special meaning? Catlin did in one instance characterize Mandan social life as "grotesque circles of never-ending laughter and fun." And from the top of one of the earth lodges, he described the village and the surrounding countryside as a "thrilling panorama." Indeed, the elevated station from which one views the village in this painting does provide a panorama—but for whom? Clearly not for the Mandan. Those peering over the artist's shoulder in the future would be white audiences; for them he has invented primitive life, in all its rare and uncompromising wildness. Or, in fact, a wildness so composed that its allure and danger provided an understandable alternative to white civilization.[12]

In what other ways did Catlin describe the unforgettable scene? "There is . . . a newness and rudeness in everything," he noted. "[The] several hundred houses or dwellings about me . . . are all covered with dirt—the people are all red, and yet distinct from all other red folks I have seen. The horses are wild—every dog is a wolf—the whole moving mass are strangers to me: the living, in everything, carry an air of intractable wildness about them, and the dead are not buried, but dried upon scaffolds." Catlin was an acute and sympathetic observer of Mandan life. One might even call him an apologist for the tribe; "a better, more honest, hospitable and kind people," he wrote, "are not to be found in the world." Still, he had reservations about their "ignorant and barbarous customs," about a wild and incomprehensible strain in their make-up that seemed to him completely foreign. Like the unusual orientation of their villages, Mandan ways were disturbingly different from those of white people. No better example of that was the Mandan ritual for disposing of their dead, which Catlin not only described at length but made a picture of to confront the viewer with a scene he thought "novel," instructive, and moving (fig. 8). Bodies were not interred but deposited on lightly built scaffolds behind the village, where they remained until the scaffolds deteriorated and the skeletal remains dropped to the ground. At that point, the nearest relatives of the deceased gathered and buried the bones, but the skulls were placed in "Golgathas," as Catlin called them, circles twenty or thirty feet in diameter, at the center of which were small mounds supporting medicine poles and buffalo skulls. "Here . . . to this strange place," Catlin continued, "do these people . . . resort, to evince their . . . affections for the dead—not in groans and lamentations . . . but with 'fond' affections and endearments," and with conversations that proceeded as if the deceased were responding.[13]

Circular lodges, circular villages, circular cemeteries were repeated so often in Catlin's views of Mandan life that we must assume he thought them important. And he was not the first white man to notice them. A number of early travelers in the West, beginning with French fur trader La Vérendrye in 1738, had commented on the appearance of the Mandan earth lodges and the physical arrangement of their villages. The list continues with several of Catlin's contemporaries, or near contemporaries, including Lewis and Clark, German scientist Maximilian (his expedition included artist Carl Bodmer, who left a remarkable record of the interior of these lodges), and the previously mentioned Audubon. Rarely do these commentaries include more than physical descriptions of the lodges and villages. But does that mean that no further ideas emerged? or that Catlin's repeated notice of circular forms in and around the Mandan village was not, to some degree, idea-driven—first by a belief in racial hierarchies, widespread at the time, but more specifically by what Clifford Geertz would call an

[12] For Audubon, see John C. Ewers, "George Catlin, Painter of Indians and the West," *Smithsonian Report for 1955* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1956), p. 499. Catlin, *Letters and Notes*, 1:87. The broader implications of observing the Mandan from such a position are investigated by Alan Wallach in "Making a Picture of the View from Mount Holyoke," in David C. Miller, ed., *American Iconology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 80–91.

[13] Catlin, *Letters and Notes,* 1:87, 182, 90.

Fig. 8. George Catlin, *Back View of Mandan Village, Showing the Cemetery*, 1832. Oil on canvas; H. 11⅛″, W. 14⅜″. (Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr.)

"ordering experience?" An experience, that is, whose meaning could never be "explicitly" interpreted but that could have led Catlin to speculate, however crudely, about a link between these circular forms and a Mandan belief system.[14]

By the end of the nineteenth century, ethnographers James Mooney and James Owen Dorsey had moved from speculation to a form of cultural theorizing. Among other Plains tribes—the Kiowa, the Cheyenne, the Sioux, the Omaha—they noted that camp circles were formed in anticipation of major tribal rituals, such as the Sioux Sun Dance. From a Pawnee priest, whose words were published in 1916, comes a more specific reference. He begins by comparing a circle drawn with his toe to an eagle's nest and then says: "If you go to a high hill and look around, you will see the sky touching the earth on every side. . . . So the circles we have made are not only nests, but they also represent the circle that the [creator-being] has made for the dwelling place of all people." In 1931 the legendary Oglala holy man Black Elk carried the argument further, making a clear distinction between the "sacred hoop" in Sioux culture and his cabin on the Pine Ridge Reservation: "You will notice that everything the Indian does is in a circle. . . . but you see today that this house is not in a circle. It is a square. It is not the way we should live." The circumstances of reservation life

[14] On the procession of white visitors to several Mandan sites along the Upper Missouri River, see Alfred W. Bowers, *Mandan Social and Ceremonial Organization* (1950; repr., Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 1991), pp. 8–20; see also John Francis McDermott, "Up the Wide Missouri: Travelers and Their Diaries, 1794–1861," in J. F. McDermott, ed., *Travelers on the Western Frontier* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1970), pp. 3–78. George W. Stocking Jr., *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1968), p. 113, notes that racial hierarchies were in place by the first half of the nineteenth century. For more on "ordering experiences," see Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 128. Claude Lévi-Strauss also appears to share Geertz's belief in such a process, while regretting that anthropologists have not paid enough attention to it. He calls for more studies on the relationship between the "camp shapes of Plains Indians" and the social organization of Plains tribes, and he sees "regular variations" connecting the two (Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* [New York: Basic Books, 1963], p. 291).

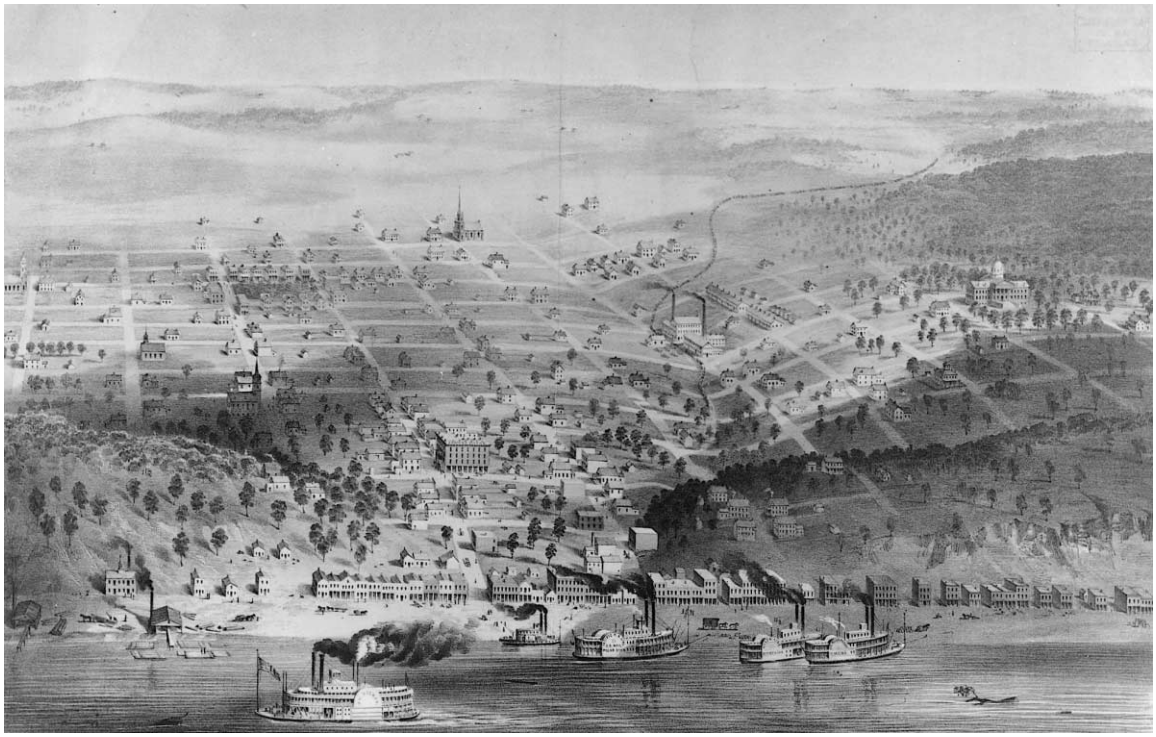

Fig. 9. Albert Conant, *View of Sumner, Kansas,* ca. 1857. Color lithograph; H. 17 13/16″, W. 28″. (Kansas State Historical Society, Copy and Reuse Restrictions Apply.)

at the time may have caused Black Elk to overstate his case; Plains tribes had never taken up one form to the exclusion of the other. Still, the power of circles has continued to influence scholars investigating these tribes. In Sioux cosmology, Raymond DeMallie writes, "The relationship between humankind, the buffalo, and all the rest of the universe was fixed. Its symbol was the circle, unending and whole." Time, therefore, "was not conceived of as a causal force," nor did Sioux history embody the European notion of linear "progress and change." More recently, Peter Nabokov and Robert Easton have observed that the social organization of many Plains groups was "encoded" in the layout of their encampments. And within the last several decades, exhibitions about Indian art (one titled *Circles of the World)* have also sought to demonstrate a concentric cosmology among these same peoples.[15]

If circles helped Plains Indians imagine a formal structure for their world, they also made it different from the world that white planners were building on the Plains. An 1859 lithograph of Sumner, Kansas, with its neat, orderly, clearly defined pattern of streets, lots, and buildings, addresses the future with the same confident air as Fuller's view of Crow Creek Agency (fig. 9). But if anything the lithograph is more assertive, lifting the vantage point well above the Missouri River and encouraging the viewer to fill in the open land beyond the town with the grid of streets already plotted. *Crow Creek Agency,* which appropriates and excludes more discretely, admits the presence of Indians outside the community

[15] Mooney's accounts of Kiowa camp circles appear in John C. Ewers, *Murals in the Round* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1978). Dorsey's views are published in James Owen Dorsey, *A Study of Siouan Cults,* 11th Annual Report (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, 1896). Hartley Burr Alexander, *North American,* vol. 10 of *Mythology of All Races,* ed. Louis Herbert Gray (Boston: Marshall Jones Co., 1916), p. 97. Black Elk quoted in Raymond J. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John J. Neihardt* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), pp. 290–91. DeMallie quoted in Raymond J. DeMallie and Douglas R. Parks, eds., *Sioux Indian Religion: Tradition and Innovation* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), p. 31. Peter Nabokov and Robert Easton, *Native American Architecture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), chap. 3. Richard Conn, *Circles of the World: Traditional Art of the Plains Indians* (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 1982); Ralph T. Coe, *Sacred Circles: Two Thousand Years of North American Indian Art* (Kansas City: Nelson Gallery of Art, 1977). Sam D. Gill, *Native American Religions: An Introduction* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1982), pp. 29, 35–36, cautions against an "oversimplistic and all-inclusive model of the sacred circle."

proper. If the picture is less assertive as a townscape, however, it still relies heavily on a ground plan of rectangles and diagonals to organize agency spaces, whether given over to food production, education, or living quarters. And the painting shares many other features with the lithograph of Sumner. Steamboats plying the nearby rivers suggest that both communities are modern and progressive, in touch with the outside world. Churches, civic buildings, businesses, factories, farms, and individual homes—the institutional framework of society—are clearly designated in both pictures. At the same time, nature, in the form of surrounding low hills and the river, seems to accommodate and provide for each community. But the chief function of both lithograph and painting was to soften and subdue nature, to impose on it an order that would enable civilization and progress to take root on the Great Plains.

Grid plans provided an effective way to impose that order. Their precedents date back to Roman times, organizing community space into a series of standard rectangular units, intersected by major thoroughfares usually running at right angles to one another. Early in the nineteenth century, Congress applied the plan wholesale to the newly acquired lands west of the Mississippi, so that a vast checkerboard laid across the landscape determined the regional administration of states and territories, and small-scale versions, less rigid in their geometry, guided the design of towns and cities. These plans served to place individuals within a societal structure that was understood to be rational, efficient, and democratically inspired. Moreover, grids prepared the Great Plains for capitalism. They quantified the land, assigned it a value, and mandated its use for profit, all of which led to grand hopes for economic prosperity. What the system promised for settlers, most of them white, was a future that would justify the hard work of pioneering.

The ideological gap between the lithograph of Sumner and *Crow Creek Agency* on one hand, and Catlin's *Mandan Village* on the other, can now be clearly seen. The first two pictures are less about the present than the future—the dynamic, prosperous future in store for the residents of the town and, to a lesser extent, the agency. But Catlin's painting merges present and past, consigning the Mandan to an ideal but unchanging primitive world. Just how much optimism is embodied in the views of Sumner and Crow Creek Agency can be judged from contemporary accounts of each place, one in the form of a letter written by a Sumner resident a year after the lithograph was made, the other a set of prints of Crow Creek Agency presumably taken by a local photographer about the same time Fuller painted his view. The letter, written by young Bostonian James Ingalls to his father, is a scathing indictment of the lithograph. The view in the lithograph, which presumably had lured young Ingalls to Sumner, portrayed a community much more developed than the one he found when he arrived.

> There is only one street in the place that has any pretension to a grade, the others being merely footpaths leading up and down the wild ravines to the few log huts and miserable cabins which compose the city. . . . There are no churches . . . instead of four, as was represented to me. No respectable residences; no society; no women except a few woebegone, desolate-looking old creatures; no mechanical activities [meaning, presumably, artisanal industries or small-scale manufacturing]; nothing which would seem to represent a large and intelligent energy, no schools, no children, nothing but the total reverse of the picture . . . presented to me . . . [on] the engraved romance [Ingalls' derisive term for the lithograph].[16]

So the Sumner lithograph, for all its intriguing detail, was little more than an attractively composed sales pitch, perhaps aimed at educated young easterners like Ingalls who were looking for new prospects out West. But it must have also represented the wishful thinking of the town fathers, who hoped that some day Summer would look more like the lithograph.

Photographs of Crow Creek Agency (figs. 10, 11), probably taken during the 1880s, also reveal a misrepresentation. Fuller's painting embellished the buildings and grounds of the agency, giving them a trimmer, brighter, more impressive look. He did, however, remain true to what was already (at least partially) visible in the photographs. He did not add buildings or a fictional grid of paths to the agency grounds; instead, he sharpened the lines, colors, and patterns that marked the agency buildings and clarified agency activities—farming, manufacturing, religious training, educational instruction, and so on. And he provided a key, naming each of the figures in the foreground and the buildings in the background so that the painting could be read like a map—like a methodically drafted

[16] Lisa K. Dorrill, "Illustrating the Ideal City: Nineteenth-Century American Bird's-Eye Views," *Imprint: Journal of the American Historical Print Collection Society* 18 (Autumn 1993): 21–22.

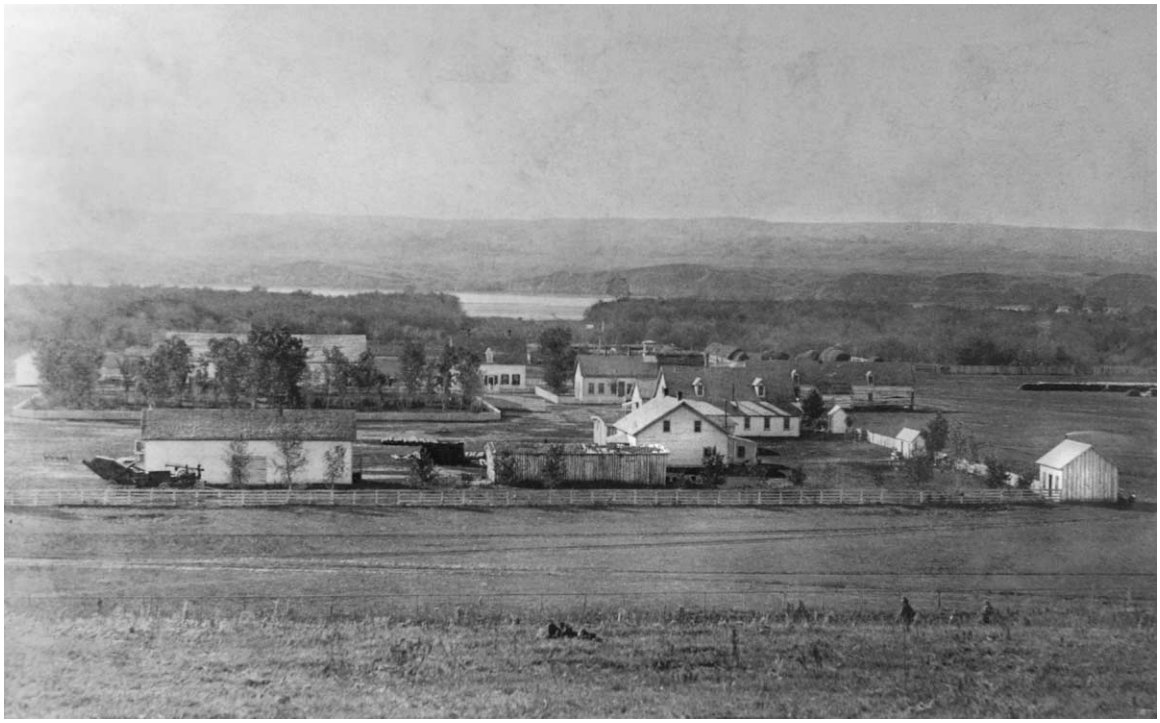

Fig. 10. J. N. Templeman, Crow Creek Agency grounds, 1880–90. Photograph. (Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.)

Fig. 11. J. N. Templeman, Crow Creek Agency grounds, 1880–90. Photograph. (Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.)

document that offered a careful inventory of who and what was there. And yet, that is precisely where image and reality part. For all its map-like present, Fuller's painting tells a more compelling story about the future, about the mission of the reservation. The story is made believable by the amicable introduction to the principal characters in the agency, both white (or of mixed blood) and Indian; by lush meadows and carefully tilled farm plots; by tidy buildings set on bright patches of green landscape; and by a variety of clouds that pleasantly decorate the sky.[17] Who cares if it looks like Oz? We have been willingly seduced.

With the aid of young Ingall's remarks, we can imagine another very different view of the Sumner townscape. And we know that although Catlin visited the Mandan village in 1832, the painting was done later after a small pox epidemic had wreaked havoc upon the tribe. But even without that knowledge, what might Catlin's contemporaries have thought about *Mandan Village?* One clue is provided by mountain man Jedediah Smith, who remarked in 1822 after observing Sioux at leisure in one of their villages, that the experience would "almost persuade a man to renounce the world, take to the lodge and live the careless, lazy life of an Indian." Might Catlin's Mandan, lolling about the roofs of their lodges, have been seen in the same light? White men crossing the Great Plains in the 1830s and 1840s held different, sometimes conflicted, views of the Indian tribes they encountered. And Catlin was no exception. The Mandans, for example, he thought "free from . . . a thousand cares and jealousies, which arise from mercenary motives in the civilized world; and . . . far ahead of us . . . in the real and uninterrupted enjoyment of their simple natural facilities." At the same time, he wished that "their thoughts and tastes. . .turned to agriculture and religion, could be made to abandon the dark and random channel in which they are drudging, and made to flow in the light and life of civilization." Washington Irving, also traveling on the Great Plains in 1832 (from Independence, Missouri, to Fort Gibson, Arkansas Territory), spun enthusiastic tales about noble savages; others, less concerned with literary reporting, were nonetheless curious about and admiring of the habits and customs of the tribes. But no one failed to note that for all their virtues Indians remained savages, culturally distant from the scientists, explorers, artists, and men of letters who came West to observe them and to record what they saw in the light of their own preconceptions. In general, these "encounter narratives" followed a prescription that went back to the eighteenth century: Indians were given credit for not having succumbed to the ills of progress; for living in harmony with nature; for bravery, courage, and an independent spirit; and for being (sometimes), friendly, helpful, and supportive hosts. But sooner or later, these same individuals or tribes would betray themselves by examples of so-called savage behavior—lies, theft, laziness, drunkenness, sexual misconduct, brutal treatment of animals, bloodthirsty acts of vengeance—making it clear that they lacked the virtues of a white Christian society.[18]

Once on reservations, Indians were supposed to take on these virtues. In *Crow Creek Agency,* for example, no one lolls about—Indians (and a few whites?) move purposefully across the clearly defined walkways of the agency campus. Everyone seems to have a destination, a goal. Farming, the principal occupation of the agency, is signified by the cultivated fields in the background but has a more immediate role in the foreground, where the major tribal figures are framed on the left by a new, brightly painted farm wagon and on the right by the farm manager on horseback (fig. 12). Other Indians, in the background, proceed with a variety of tasks and daily activites: at the government office (number 18 on the legend); the issue house, from which they drew supplies (number 19); the saw mill (number 21); the

[17] Flanking the Indians are Mark and Wallace Wells (numbers 5 and 6), brothers and of mixed descent, the offspring of a Santee mother and a white father. At Crow Creek, Mark served as interpreter and Wallace as the farm supervisor; both worked hard to acclimate the Sioux to reservation life; see Dean, "Story of the Crow Creek Agency Picture," n. 1.

[18] Smith quoted in Lewis O. Saum, *The Fur Trade and the Indian* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), p. 95, see also pp. 91–113. Catlin, *Letters and Notes,* 1:85, 183. Another interpretation of *Mandan Village,* which to some extent I have followed, can be found in Julie Schimmel, "Inventing the Indian," in William H. Truettner, ed., *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), p. 157. John Francis McDermott, ed., *The Western Journals of Washington Irving* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1944), pp. 44–49. Prince Maximilian also spent several months in 1832 at the Mandan village observing the tribe in winter quarters; see Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels, 1748–1846,* 32 vols. (1904–7; repr., New York: AMS Press, 1966), 23:253–301. On the social and cultural framework for encounter narratives, see Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), pp. 51–80.

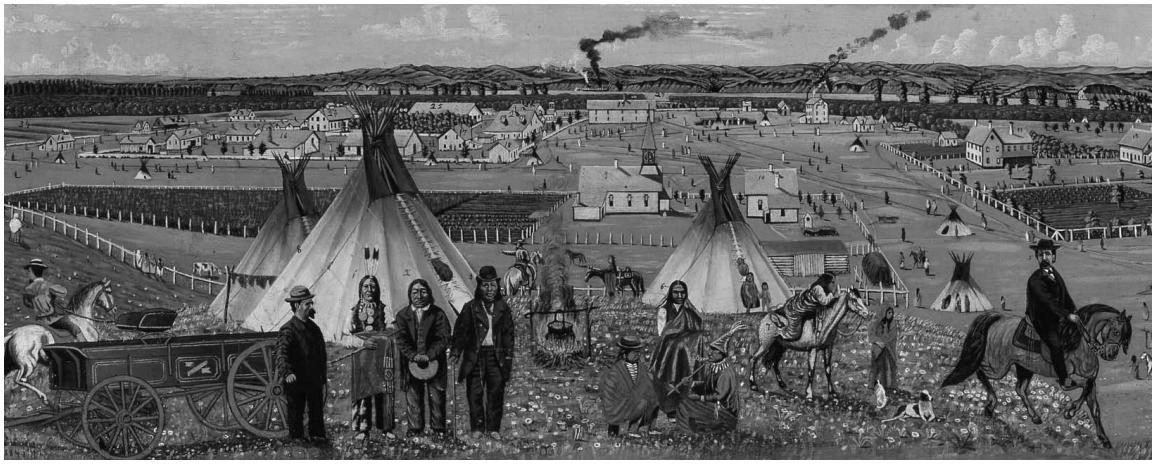

Fig. 12. Detail of fig. 1.

government school (number 12); and the dormitories (numbers 11 and 13). The general impression is one of activity and industry—teaching Indians to help themselves. The process, designed both to uproot previous bad habits and to force-feed reservation values, was presumed to form a bond between Indians and whites—or, more precisely, to prepare Indians to become productive, self-sustaining citizens in a white world.

Several design schemes in the painting, perhaps employed quite unintentionally by Fuller, make evident the reservation ideology. In the left foreground (identified by numbers 1, 2, and 3), are three chiefs (White Ghost, a Yankton Sioux; Drifting Goose, a Yanktonai Sioux; and Wizi, a Yankton Sioux) who in life had adopted various attitudes toward assimilation. Arranged as they are in front of a tepee but with the church close by and the agency proper stretching across the background, their dress reveals a trend toward accepting white ways. The relationship between the Sioux tepees and the agency buildings is also revealing—the tepees, in effect, surround the agency in much the same way that tepees surrounded forts in the earlier fur trade pictures. But like those earlier images, the agency buildings are laid out in a neat rectangular design (although without the fortifications), while the tepees are less formally arranged in the fields adjoining the agency compound. Moreover, no spatial coordinates locate the tepees within agency circulation patterns, nor do they have specialized functions like the agency buildings, which are of different shapes and sizes to mark their roles within the larger (and more productive) agency compound. The life that goes on around the tepees appears to reach back to the past, to the habits and customs that would have been practiced in the Mandan village; it is unspecialized, and therefore less productive. Proximity to the agency will soon change that, one assumes. The benefits that the agency can provide will eventually bring about access to a more developed society.

Still, Fuller cannot help registering separation between the races, culturally as well as spatially, and this and other signs tell us that the relationship between whites and Indians was more cautious and reserved than a first glance might indicate. What one encounters, despite all Fuller's efforts to downplay it, is a racial hierarchy that if not solidly entrenched seems no more likely to change than the prospect of dry summers in the Dakotas. The Indians in the foreground, especially the three who stand together, assuming the stiff, proud formation of pioneer homeowners in Solomon Butcher photographs, seem to sense this, to the extent that they enact a similar narrative (fig. 13). And yet that formation cuts two ways. All three Indians took part in agency affairs and were highly regarded by both the white administrators at the agency and their own people.[19] White

[19] For Butcher photographs, see John Carter, *Solomon D. Butcher: Photographing the American Dream* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985); Butcher's studio was located in Custer County, Nebr., only a few hundred miles south of Crow Creek Agency. Dean, "Story of the Crow Creek Agency Picture," n. 1. According to period reports, mostly written by white clergymen or others associated with them, the Crow Creek Indians were considered "peaceable." Moreover, they "long[ed] for a minister, for schools, and for instruction in agricultural handcraft" (Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve, *That They May Have Life: The Episcopal Church in South Dakota, 1859–1976* [New York: Seabury Press, 1977], p. 41).

Fig. 13. Solomon Butcher, *Sylvester Rawding House, North of Sargent, Custer County, Nebraska*, 1886. Photograph. (Nebraska State Historical Society Solomon D. Butcher Collection.)

Ghost, on the left, was the most influential Indian at Crow Creek. He was not in favor of assimilation, as his dress indicates, but he was firmly against more battles with white men. Drifting Goose, known as "colorful" and "resourceful," was chief of the Hunkpapa band of the Yanktonai for forty-five years. And Wizi, third in line, was a mediator who tried to keep disagreements between the tribes and between whites and Indians to a minimum. So the three should have been singled out for their individual accomplishments. But in the shifting world of reservation values, they are also subject to official white scrutiny (after completion, the painting was hung in the agency office) and to a role that visually reinforces the "progressive" ideology of the reservation system. On the basis of what we know about conditions at Crow Creek and other agencies, the order that prevails on agency grounds is more evidence of wishful thinking, of trying to compose a program that will mask agency dysfunction. The backdrop for all this, the surrounding landscape, is equally suspect. No hint of summer drought is evident on the green fields or on the distant hills, mud and spring debris have miraculously disappeared from the improbably blue Missouri River, and overhead, spectacular cloud formations make up for an endlessly flat, mostly uninspiring terrain. A promotional brochure could not have made the reservation look more fertile and attractive, and yet it barely provided a livelihood for the Indians who worked the land.

The reservation system was in many ways a well-meaning attempt to provide safe passage for Indians from one lifestyle to another. It was also, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a system mired in deceit and corruption. Tribes forced to live on reservations deeply resented the loss of their autonomy and the forced substitution of an agricultural for a hunting economy. Reservations, in turn, were badly managed, inadequately supplied, and often formed from land that whites had already rejected for agricultural use. As a result, the instruction they offered

as well as the cultural training that accompanied it rarely had its intended effect.[20]

How much of this general assessment of reservation life applies to Crow Creek Agency in 1884 is difficult to determine. But clearly the agency (established in 1863) got off to a shaky start. The first Indians to arrive were the Santee, or Eastern Sioux, a tribe that had faced near starvation on its original reservation, had rebelled, and had massacred white settlers living in the nearby town of New Ulm, Minnesota. Thirty-eight Santee who had taken part in the massacre were hung in public in Mankato, Minnesota (President Lincoln commuted the death sentences of 269 others); the rest were shipped like cattle on small steamboats down the Mississippi River to St. Joseph, then up the Missouri River to Crow Creek. Many died shortly after they arrived—so many that "the hills around the agency were covered with the graves of women and children." Along with the Winnebago, who had also been dispatched to the agency, the Santee were required to learn farming, on land that even then was thought to be "miserable." The Winnebago left the next year after crops failed. The Santee lasted until 1866, when they were moved further west to make room for another influx of Sioux, who also needed surveillance and care. The new arrivals were mostly Yankton and Yanktonai, who apparently subsisted on rations as well as what they managed to grow or produce.[21]

Two reports, one issued in 1885, the other in 1887, give firsthand accounts of agency affairs. The 1885 report tells of challenges to the agency land title brought on by a local commission intent upon distributing agency land to white merchants, mechanics, professionals, and "loafers" living nearby. William H. Parkhurst, the former agent at Crow Creek, testified that the commission displayed "a degree of selfishness, grasping greed, [and a] . . . dispensation to be manifestly unfair" that was "unequaled" in his experience. By 1887, agency affairs had apparently improved, although climate remained an overwhelming problem. Without more rainfall or an irrigation system, the report noted, crops planted in the wet spring season rarely made it through the dry summers, "perishing in the relentless dessication of the area." To make matters worse, title to the reservation was apparently still unsecured, discouraging those in charge from making long-term capital improvements to the land. Given these conditions—the number of Indians who had to be supported on arid, infertile land—it is doubtful that the agency ever flourished. Indeed, one gets the impression of things going steadily downhill. In 1889, when South Dakota became a state, the size of the reservation was again reduced, and the next year the Bureau of Indian Affairs reported that many at the agency were suffering from tuberculosis, scrofula, influenza, and conjunctivits.[22] One can imagine the mood of despair and hopelessness that must have descended over agency residents.

Are we to conclude, then, that both Catlin's *Mandan Village* and Fuller's *Crow Creek Agency* are subtle forms of propaganda, invented to extol noble savagery on one hand and to provide an officially sanctioned, upbeat view of reservation life on the other? If asked such a question, Catlin and Fuller would very likely have denied such intentions, claiming instead that they were determined to provide a truthful account of Indian life, whether beyond the white frontier or as a part of it. That does not mean, however, that Catlin chose to ignore the widespread political and racial issues of his own time. He was, for example, deeply convinced that he was painting a vanishing race. Many of his pictures reveal this; they reach back to preserve an ideal past, a perfect state of savagery. But perfection, one surmises, only preceded devastating change—that is, perfection was in its

[20] The basic text for the post–Civil War Indian reform movement is Francis Paul Prucha, *American Indian Policy in Crisis* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964); see also Robert Winston Mardock, *The Reformers and the American Indian* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1971). For reservation conditions during that period, see Wilcomb Washburn, *The Indian in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), pp. 209–32. There are, of course, individual narratives that offer a more positive view of reservation life; see Gilbert L. Wilson, *Goodbird the Indian: His Story* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985), pp. 55–64.

[21] Sneve, *That They May Have Life*, p. 19; and Dykshorn, "William Fuller's Crow Creek," pp. 411–13. For a more detailed account of events at the agency, see Raymond J. DeMallie, *Yankton and Yanktonai,* vol. 13, pt. 2 of William C. Sturtevant, ed., *Handbook of North American Indians* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), pp. 780–84.

[22] William H. Parkhurst, "The Winnebago or Crow Creek Steal," *The Council Fire and Arbitrator,* May 1885, pp. 77–81, quote on p. 80; see also Prucha, *American Indian Policy,* p. 141. Jonathan Baxter Harrison, *The Latest Studies on Indian Reservations* (Philadelphia: Indian Rights Assoc., 1887), pp. 44–49, quote on p. 47. Whites who were advocates of reservation life, disenchanted by how little it had accomplished, may have encouraged this kind of literature. For 1889 conditions, see Prucha, *American Indian Policy,* pp. 182–87; and Dykshorn, "William Fuller's Crow Creek," p. 419.

Fig. 14. William Fuller, *Crow Creek Reservation*, 1893. Oil on canvas; H. approx. 30″, W. approx. 60″. (Museum of the South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre S.D., gift of Clara Anderson.)

own way a lament, issued on behalf of a dying race. With one notable caveat. The lament was less often directed less toward the exit of a beleaguered native tribe than to excusing those responsible for its destruction. Indians could not adjust to white civilization, Catlin wrote, perhaps recalling the small pox epidemic that had all but destroyed the Mandan, "and so they must perish."[23] Paintings like *Mandan Village,* therefore, send a disturbing message today. They appear to cherish and at the same time consign to an imaginary past the proud, independent natives who unfortunately lacked the benefits of white civilization. Indians thought and moved in circles; white people proceeded along straight lines that led them rapidly from one destination to the next.

And what about Fuller? Records tell us that he was employed by the Union Pacific Railroad in 1867. Two years later he was living in Chicago. In 1871 he went west, presumably to begin employment at Crow Creek. As agency carpenter, his job was twofold—keeping the buildings in good repair and teaching his trade to young Indians. His artistic activities, whenever they began, were confined to biannual vacations, each lasting two months. His first known work is dated 1882; the last, 1893. All are agency subjects—two are similar to *Crow Creek Agency* and two are of Sioux scaffold burials with the agency shown in the background. Of the two agency pictures, one is larger and later than the Amon Carter example and is more bucolic in appearance, with a group of cattle, perhaps lifted from a seventeenth-century Dutch painting, wandering through the right foreground (fig. 14). Galloping across the left foreground of the picture is John Q. Anderson, who may have commissioned the painting from Fuller. Anderson was the government cattle trader at the agency, although here he looks more like Buffalo Bill riding the range. One wonders if Fuller was portraying his patron as a mythical cowboy, a figure out of the Old West, to match those in Buffalo Bill's show, which was playing in Chicago the same year the painting was done. The scaffold burial pictures perhaps also give some insight into Fuller's attitude toward Indians. One is a particularly grisly scene, showing vultures picking at three draped coffins on top of a crudely made scaffold, while below Indians in traditional dress (some adorned with war paint) sacrifice horses that presumably belonged to the deceased (fig. 15). A few years earlier, government officials had mandated the use of coffins rather than buffalo robes in scaffold burials, a change that Fuller shows taking place. But by the time this picture was painted, the practice had been outlawed altogether (or

[23] Patricia Limerick notes that "Catlin was drawn to the thanatological. . . . Unmistakable in his insatiable grieving is the emotional stimulus of savoring mortality, of looking over the edge of the abyss, aware that others are about to go over it" (Patricia Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest* [New York: Norton, 1988], p. 187). Richard Slotkin, introducing *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 1986), p. xxv, says "Cooper never loves his Indians so much as when he is watching them disappear."

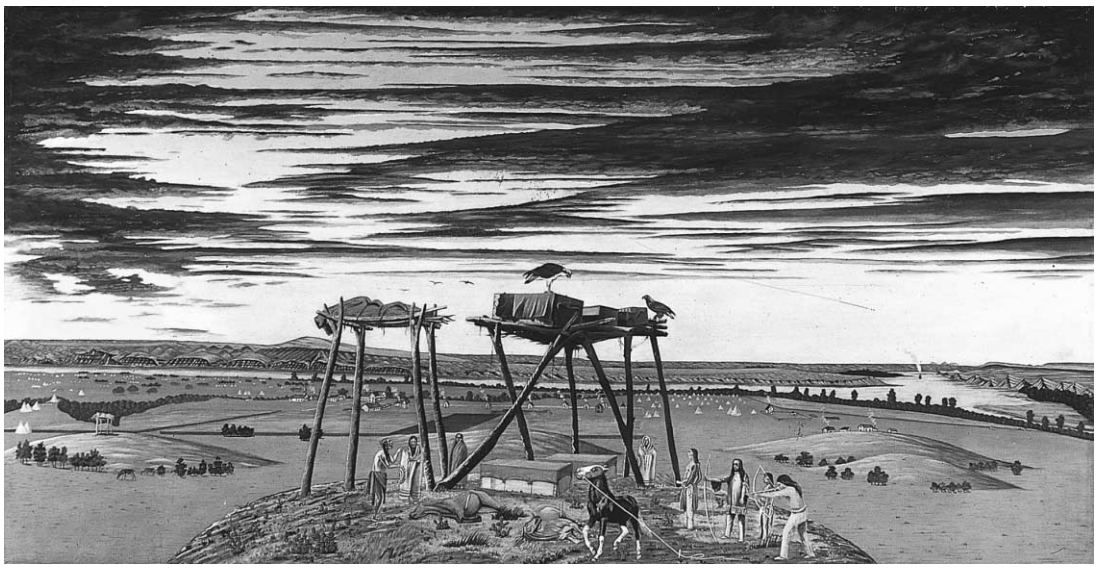

Fig. 15. William Fuller, *Indian Burial, Lower Brule, Dakota Territory*, 1882. Oil on canvas; H. 28½″, W. 55″. (Museum of the South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre S.D., gift of Matilda Fuller.

moved to distant parts of the reservation, beyond the surveillance of white administrators), as part of a broad campaign to extinguish tribal customs that officials believed interfered with the process of assimilation. Even so, one is surprised that Fuller has gone to such lengths to disparage this type of Indian burial. Catlin's Mandan cemetery, with its air of mystery and exoticism, is still a serious ethnographic inquiry into the subject. Fuller reveals no such curiosity. He has instead turned his scaffold picture into a brutal, savage ritual, performed under a doomsday sky. Only the agency in the background, set in a broad, well-ordered landscape, softens the otherwise uncompromising view of Indian life.[24]

As one who taught his trade to young Indians with the intention of improving their chances of survival in the difficult transition that lay ahead, Fuller (one would assume) believed in the reservation system and in the benefits it offered to Indians willing to assimilate. Scaffold burials, therefore, represented the past; the future lay on the network of pathways that crossed the neatly composed agency grounds, the outward sign of a transformative inner experience guiding those who proceeded through the agency program. But then the question arises, how could Fuller have been so oblivious to conditions at Crow Creek Agency? The answer is that he probably was not. But the painting does not "document" agency life. Like Catlin, Fuller was compelled to make the best of a difficult situation, to show that Indians and whites, when brought together under the right circumstances, could somehow transform a half-century of conflict and warfare into a productive future. If the present reservation system could not accomplish this then he would provide, without necessarily meaning to do so, an imaginative substitute.

Acknowledging conquest as inevitable, Catlin resorted to painting pictures of a vanishing race. But in the long run, Indians did not vanish. They became displaced instead, living on reservations inadequate for their physical and spiritual needs. Fuller's mission was to rectify that situation, to help Indians improve their lot. What we see in his picture, therefore, is not everyday life at Crow Creek Agency but an attractively rendered account of then-current reservation ideology—

[24] Dykshorn, "William Fuller's Crow Creek," esp. p. 413, provides the most complete account of Fuller's activities that I have located. A copy of the article in the Amon Carter Museum's curatorial files has additional biographical information in marginal notes made by the niece and nephew of Matilda Fuller, the artist's daughter. Joy Kasson, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), pp. 99–114; and Paul Reddin, *Wild West Shows* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), pp. 115–23. Scaffold burials were outlawed at Crow Creek by or before 1882, so Fuller's paintings that include them may be, at least in that particular detail, retrospective; Dykshorn, "William Fuller's Crow Creek, p. 415. On the other hand, JoAllyn Archambault, director of the North American Indian Program at the Smithsonian, suggests that the burials may have simply been shifted to more distant parts of the reservation, which were, by tacit agreement, off-limits to the white administrators.

of assimilation, redemption, and uplift. And yet what the picture also reveals is that "improvement" came at the expense of the Indians. It was their habits and customs, not those of whites, that were set aside or subtly disparaged. Racial hierarchies, evident in all aspects of the appearance *Crow Creek Agency,* help accomplish this goal. From the bright quadrants of color and neatly arranged agency buildings to the "parade" formation of the Indians in the foreground, this is an image that clearly privileges the values of white civilization. And in that way, it reveals a basic theme of reservation programs. But while requiring Indians to believe that white values were superior to those that they had been forced to abandon, reservations rarely, if ever, helped Indians find a new and better life. That was perhaps one of many ironies that caused Fuller to invent on canvas a world different from the one in which he found himself.