

Prince Max Meets the Mandan: The Story of How a German Prince and a Swiss Artist Saved the Cultural Heritage of the Mandan Indians

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In 1832 the German Prince Maximilian of Wied, accompanied by Swiss artist Karl Bodmer, embarked on a two-year expedition to North America. They spent the winter of 1833-34 at Fort Clark in Missouri Territory (now North Dakota) where they were befriended by the Mandan Indians. Much of that winter was spent with Bodmer painting Indian portraits while Prince Max interviewed the Indians and recorded detailed ethn-logical notes on the tribe's history, culture, and customs.

Their expedition was remarkable for many reasons, not least of which was the personalities and unique qualifications of the men involved. Prince Alexander Philip Maximilian Wied was born in 1782, the eighth of eleven children. As one of the youngest in the family, Max had few royal duties and was encouraged to pursue his lifelong love of natural history. Following the requisite military service, he attended university at Göttingen where he studied under Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, a pioneer in physical or comparative anthropology.¹

Under Blumenbach's tutelage, Max's interests broadened to include indigenous and aboriginal peoples. At the time, European intellectuals were engaged in a debate over the origin – or origins – of man. Just as today's debate is on evolution vs. creationism, the pre-Darwinian debate was over epigenesis vs. polygenesis. Called the “second great age of discovery” by historian William H. Goetzmann, this was a time in which cultural, biological, and geographic information was flooding into Europe from all corners of the globe. French historian Fernand Braudel wrote of this time, “The voyages around the world had no other goal than to obtain new information about geography, the natural world, and the mores of different peoples.”²

The question was how to piece all this new information together to try to make sense of the world. One of the prevailing theories was that indigenous and aboriginal peoples were either younger souls who had not yet progressed to the level of the Europeans. Or, at the other end of the spectrum, they were older souls who had

¹David Thomas and Karin Ronnefeldt, eds., *People of the First Man: Life Among the Plains Indians in Their Final Days of Glory, The Firsthand Account of Prince Maximilian's Expedition up the Missouri River, 1833-34* (New York: Promontory Press, 1976) 11. See also Maximilian Prince of Wied, illus. Karl Bodmer, *Travels in the Interior of North America During the Years 1832-1834* (Köln: Taschen, 2001) 262.

²*Karl Bodmer's America*, Joslyn Art Museum (Tokyo: Dai Nippon Printing Co. Ltd., 1984) 5-7. Hereafter cited as *America*; Brandon K. Ruud, ed., *Karl Bodmer's North American Prints* (Omaha: Joslyn Art Museum, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004) 3-7. Hereafter referred to as *Prints*.

degenerated past their prime.³ Regardless, they were not on par with the Europeans, considered the gold standard by which all others were compared. The philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder went further, implicating physiognomic differences in issues of character, ethics, morality, and virtue. He equated pleasing physical characteristics with goodness, while those considered less attractive were deemed lacking in character and virtue.⁴

The physiognomic differences of the people of the world were so great that many simply could not believe that all of mankind could be related by a single creation. There must have been two or more creations of man. Others maintained a belief in a single creation and theorized that physical variances were due to environmental factors, such as climate, habitat, means of subsistence, and diet. These were important questions of the day having significant political and theological, as well as scientific implications.⁵

Blumenbach was a proponent of the single creation theory and his work focused on determining the causality of the disparate physiognomies. By studying numerous skulls and portraits of diverse peoples, he identified the five races still recognized today – Caucasian, American (Indian), Ethiopian, Mongolian, and Malayan. He further concluded that the Caucasian skull was the most perfect and symmetrical, the primeval prototype from which all others diverged.⁶

Blumenbach believed it was just a matter of collecting sufficient evidence to prove his theory. To that extent, he taught a course called “Apodemics,” or the art of traveling, in which he instructed students on the methodology of disciplined and systematic gathering and organizing of information. He then encouraged his students to travel the world in search of evidence. Prince Max was one of these students.⁷

Meanwhile, the eminent explorer Alexander von Humboldt, a previous student of Blumenbach, befriended Max and encouraged him to embark on his own expedition. Inspired by Humboldt, Max conducted an expedition to the Brazilian jungles, one of the first non-Portuguese permitted to do so. Accompanied by two German naturalists, Max spent two years in the eastern Brazilian jungles (1815-1817), keeping meticulously detailed field notes on the flora, fauna, and native tribes.⁸

Upon his return from Brazil, Max published his field notes as a two-volume journal. It proved very popular, quickly selling out and was subsequently published in five languages. It was quite well received except for one problem. Max’s own sketches and drawings from his field notes were used to illustrate the travel journal and it seems Max was a bit lacking in artistic ability. He received so much criticism and ridicule over the poor quality of his artwork that he was determined to hire a professional artist to

³ *America* 6.

⁴ Herder, Johann Gottfried, *On World History, an Anthology*, ed. Hans Adler and Ernest A. Menze, trans. Ernest A. Menze and Michael Palma. (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1977).

⁵ *America* 5-7.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*; *Prints* 3-7

⁸ Thomas 10; *Prints* 6-8.

accompany him on his next expedition. But, as he wrote a friend, he wanted someone who “wouldn’t be too hard on the pocketbook.”⁹

Karl Bodmer proved to be that artist. Bodmer was born in 1809 near Zurich, Switzerland to a German-speaking family. He showed artistic ability at an early age and, together with his older brother Rudolf was sent to study art with an uncle Johann Jakob Meier, an accomplished artist and copperplate engraver. In their early twenties, the brothers traveled down the Rhine to Coblenz, Germany where Karl painted landscapes and Rudolf did the engravings, trying to establish themselves as artists. Karl soon began making a name for himself as a talented landscape artist.¹⁰

Coblenz is located just south of Max’s ancestral home at Neuwied. Max learned of Bodmer, met with him, and offered him the position of expedition artist. The two entered into a formal contract detailing Bodmer’s salary, assignments, responsibility for supplies and equipment, and other duties. With future publication in mind, the contract also stipulated that all artwork, save for those Bodmer did on his own time, would become the property of Prince Max.¹¹

Max and Bodmer sailed for America in 1832, arriving at Boston on the 4th of July, just in time for the Independence Day celebration. Max immediately began looking for Indians and was surprised and disappointed not to find any.¹² In fact, he would not see his first Indian until he reached St. Louis. In the meantime, the expedition progressed slowly westward with Max, Bodmer, and Max’s royal retainer/hunter/taxidermist David Dreidoppel, collecting numerous specimens of plants, reptiles, and amphibians – anything that was new or unusual to them.¹³

It took them the better part of a year to reach the Mississippi River. They arrived at St. Louis on March 24, 1833 where they met General William Clark (of Lewis and Clark fame), then Superintendent of Indian Affairs responsible for all matters involving Indians and the Western country. Anyone wishing to enter Indian Country was required

⁹ *Prints* 6-8; *America* 6.

¹⁰ *America*, “Karl Bodmer: The Artist’s Life,” 349-376, William J. Orr’s biographical sketch of Bodmer.

¹¹ Thomas 11-12.; *America* 6.

¹² Bodmer, Karl, Hannibal Lloyd, and Maximilian Wied. *Maximilian, Prince of Wied’s Travels in the Interior of North America, 1843* (Volume 1). (Carlisle, MA: Applewood Books, 2006.) 215-217. This is a reprint of chapters I-XV of the original English version of Maximilian’s 3-volume travel journal, published in London by Ackermann and Co., 1843, translated from German by H. Evans Lloyd. Volume I covers their departure from Germany in May, 1832 to their time at Fort Union, June-July, 1833. It also includes woodcut engravings of some of Bodmer’s original sketches.

¹³ *America* 39-121 covers their travels east of the Mississippi, from July 4, 1832 to March 24, 1833. So many specimens had been collected in the first part of their journey that a shipment had to be sent home to Germany. Max spent four months over the winter of 1832-33 at New Harmony, Indiana, recuperating from a “cholera-like” illness, while Bodmer took a side trip down the Mississippi to ship the first load of specimens back to Germany from New Orleans. He also spent time with several Indian tribes in Louisiana and Mississippi, painting portraits and landscapes of the area. Naturalist Thomas Say was in charge of the utopian community at New Harmony, and French naturalist and painter Charles LeSueur was in residence during Max’s stay.

to obtain a passport from General Clark.¹⁴ Max and Bodmer had considered trekking into Indian Country on foot, but at Clark's recommendation, they decided to take the American Fur Company's new steam ship, the S.S. *Yellow Stone*, up the Missouri River. Not only would it be safer to travel by ship, but it would also be easier to transport the myriad specimens of flora, fauna, and Indian artifacts they planned to collect and ship back to Germany.¹⁵

On April 10, 1833 Max and Bodmer left St. Louis on the S.S. *Yellow Stone*, anxious to see Indians in their native habitat for the first time. The fact that they had not seen any Indian east of the Mississippi River confirmed to Max that the Indians were being driven into extinction. As the *Yellow Stone* headed up the Missouri, it made stops at the Fur Company's forts to unload supplies. This usually took several days, affording Max and Bodmer an opportunity to meet and interact with local Indians. By the 1830s, the Indians had been decimated by disease and skirmishes with white men and rival Indians. Many of the tribes had taken to camping near the forts for protection, as well as for trading purposes. Some were willing to sit for a portrait in exchange for beads, paint, or small trinkets.¹⁶

Max and Bodmer planned to reach the Missouri's headwaters and spend the winter in the Rocky Mountains. At Fort McKenzie, they ran into Indian hostilities and decided to return down river to spend the winter at Fort Clark. This was near the site of Lewis and Clark's first winter camp.¹⁷ At Fort Clark, Max and Bodmer found themselves among the Mandan Indians, long considered friendly and reliable allies to the white men.¹⁸ In 1804, William Clark wrote in his journal, "The Mandan are at War with all who make war on them, at present with the Seauex only, and wish to be at peace with *all* nations. Seldom the aggressors –."¹⁹

The Mandan soon came to trust Max and Bodmer. They understood the strangers wanted only to paint their picture and learn about their history, customs, and culture, unlike others who sought to exploit their land and its resources. A two-room cabin was built especially for Max and Bodmer, with one room set up as an art studio. The Mandan were frequent visitors, often spending the night. In return, Max and Bodmer were invited to visit the Indians' huts and they were frequent guests at Indian ceremonies and rituals.²⁰

¹⁴ Bodmer 215-217.

¹⁵ Thomas 18.

¹⁶ Ibid. 33-36 for a description of the scene at Ft. Clark on their trip upriver; 47 for painting of Fort Union; 50-56 for description of scene at Ft. Union.

¹⁷ Thomas 94-144 for journal entries and paintings of their time at Fort McKenzie.

¹⁸ Ibid. 208; Not only were the Mandan considered the most peaceful tribe, they were also known as the most culturally advanced of all the Plains tribes.

¹⁹ William Clark, *Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1803-1806*. Published online by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, accessed 16 Aug 2007. Clark's quote regarding the peaceful nature of the Mandan is excerpted from his journal entry of 12 Nov 1804. <<http://lewisandclarkjournals.unl.edu/hilight.php?id=361&keyword=November%2012,%201804&keyword2=&keyword3>> .

²⁰ Thomas 173-205 for journal entries of their time at Ft. Clark.

The winter of 1833-1834 was one of the coldest recorded. Max regularly checked his thermometer and made frequent mention of the temperature in his journal. At nearby Fort Union, the temperature was said to have reached 77° below zero. Their cabin was not well made and the snow blew in through cracks in the walls. At times, it was so cold inside the cabin that Bodmer's paints froze and had to be thawed out.²¹

Nevertheless, Bodmer was able to complete a number of paintings while Max engaged in long conversations with groups of Indians huddled in their cabin late into the night. The fort's director, James Kipp, played the role of Max's tireless interpreter.²² The Indians revealed to Max what they knew of their history. The Mandan were originally an eastern tribe living near the seacoast; they had gradually been displaced, moving further and further west.²³

The Mandan also revealed details of which few, if any, white men had previously shown an interest, such as their religious or spiritual beliefs. They spoke of their gods, whom they called 'superior beings.' They described the hierarchy of their superior beings, explaining the most important was Ohmahank-Numakshi, the lord of life. They believed him to be the creator of the world and all that exists. He was the most exalted and powerful of the gods. Second in importance is Numank-Machana, the first man. Created by the lord of life, the Mandan believed the first man was given special powers and, therefore, had a dual human and divine nature. As such, the Indians worshipped Numank-Machana and offered sacrifices to him. Further, the Mandan believed the lord of life lived on the sun. Therefore, the sun played a prominent role in many Indian ceremonies. This was sometimes misinterpreted as the Indians worshipping the sun. They were not worshipping the sun, but rather worshipping and making offerings to the lord of life who lived on the sun.²⁴

The Mandan identified other superior beings, such as Omahank-Chika, the evil one of the earth. He was a malevolent spirit who wielded much influence over men, but he was not as powerful as the lord of life or the first man. Rohanka-Tauhanka was the protector of humankind. He lived on Venus and without his protection, man would have long since ceased to exist. A fifth being, unnamed, is described by Max as having no power and being akin to the wandering Jew, continually roaming the earth in human form. Another was Ochkih-Hadda, a portent of death. If he appeared to someone in a dream, it was believed that person would soon die. He is the most confusing of the superior beings and was believed to have once visited their villages and taught them many things, but has since disappeared. In their traditions, he had become a devil-like

²¹ Ibid. See journal entries for Dec. 1833–Feb. 1834 for a description of winter conditions at Fort Clark. The temperature frequently fell below zero degrees, they ran out of provisions and survived mainly on coffee, maize bread, and bean soup. The weather precluded delivery of additional supplies. The Mandan repeatedly attempted to go out hunting in the extreme cold, but animals were scarce and everyone at the fort was on the brink of starvation. In the end, Max was so weakened by scurvy he had to be helped onto the boat when the group departed in the spring.

²² Ibid. 178.

²³ Ibid. 241.

²⁴ Thomas 246.

figure of whom they were afraid. The Mandan villages all had a hideous figure representing him to which they offered sacrifices in appeasement.²⁵

The Mandan were intrigued by the night sky and many of their ceremonies were centered on the planets and stars. Max wrote that during one conversation they “asked our ideas of the various heavenly bodies, and of the origin of the universe, as they, themselves, declare their own silly traditions to be insufficient.”²⁶ Some laughed out loud when told the world was round, thinking the Europeans’ ideas were more silly than their own. Others were not so quick to dismiss it, saying they had difficulty believing this, but “as the Whites could do so much which was incomprehensible to them, it was possible they might be right on this point also.”²⁷ This reveals an Indian people more intellectually curious, reflective, and philosophical than traditional stereotypes of Native Americans suggest.

Max referred to the Indians as a superstitious people.²⁸ They constantly invoked the help and protections of their guardian spirits, routinely making offerings and sacrifices of petitions, atonement, and guidance. Nothing was undertaken without first invoking their guardian spirit, which appeared to them dreams. When they wished to choose a guardian spirit, they would fast for three or four days, sometimes longer, then retire to an isolated spot, do penance, sometimes even cut off joints of their fingers, and cry and wail to the lord of life or the first man to reveal their guardian spirit. The first animal or other object they dream of is then taken as their guardian spirit.²⁹

Max was not alone in referring to the Indians as superstitious, but it might be suggested that the Indians were doing no more or no less than were the Europeans. Both peoples were using their own perceptions of reality to try to make sense of the world around them. The difference being European perception of reality was Euro-centric, one might even say self-centric. Recall that being a white European was the gold standard to which all other peoples were compared, inevitably to their disadvantage. The Indians’ perception of reality, on the other hand, was focused away from themselves, on their superior beings and guardian spirits. They were ever cognizant of the omnipotence of their spirits and guardians and constantly sought to worship and appease them. This is a significant difference in perceptions of reality.

The Mandan told of their legends of creation, a great flood, and even a Samson-like story. The parallels with Christianity were obvious. In his notes, Max speculated on the possibility that Mandan legends and stories were influenced by contact with the Europeans. He is candid in his assessment that,

...if they have not been found inclined to the Christian religion, this is, certainly, in some measure, the consequence of the bad conduct of the Whites,

²⁵ Ibid. 246-247.

²⁶ Ibid. 243.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid. 246.

²⁹ Ibid. 246-247.



Figure 1. Chief Mato-Topé in war paint.



Figure 2. Chief Mato-Topé in ceremonial regalia.

who call themselves Christians, and are often worse, and more immoral, than the most uncivilized of the Indians.³⁰

How much of the Mandan beliefs were originally Mandan, and how much was influenced by contact with the Europeans? This question will likely remain unanswered, but what can be said is that if anything was adopted or adapted from European beliefs, it was done so by choice. The Mandan had never been in captivity, and were not forced or coerced into adopting religious beliefs. Whatever the Indians made their own, they did so because in some way it resonated with them and had some significance for them.

As detailed and thorough as Max's notes were, running to 500,000 words and later published as a three-volume set, they alone could not tell the entire story. Max could describe the appearance and physical characteristics of the Indians, the costumes, settings, songs, and dances for Indian rituals and celebrations, but without Bodmer's paintings, one cannot fully visualize and appreciate his descriptions. Conversely, one can appreciate the intricate detail work of Bodmer's paintings, but without Max's notes, the history and symbolism is lost. The power and significance of their work is in its synergy.

Consider two of Bodmer's paintings of Mato-Topé (Four Bears), a Mandan chief well known and respected by many tribes for his courage and honor. The first is a portrait of the chief in his war paint (Figure 1). The painting is impressive in its detail, but only through Max's notes is the symbolism revealed. The red stick placed transversely on the right side of his head symbolized the knife Mato-Topé used to kill a Cheyenne chief in battle. Sticking up above it are six smaller wooden sticks painted red, blue, and yellow, each with a brass nail at the tip, indicating the number of musket wounds he had received. At the back of his head, he wore a cluster of owl feathers dyed yellow to signify he was a member of the dog band of the Mandan. The split turkey feather on the top of his head indicated an arrow wound. His face was painted red and yellow, his body was painted reddish-brown with yellow horizontal stripes down his arm to symbolize his many feats and battle coups, and the yellow hand on his chest indicated he had taken prisoners.³¹

One of the last paintings Bodmer completed at Fort Clark was a full-length portrait of Mato-Topé in his finest ceremonial regalia, including buckskins and a flowing headdress of eagle feathers (Figure 2). Again, the painting is impressive in itself, but Max's notes inform the reader that having seen Mato-Topé dressed in such a manner for the ceremonial dance of the buffalo bulls, he was asked to pose for a portrait in this costume. Max writes, "The vanity which is characteristic of the Indians induced this chief to stand stock-still for several days, so that his portrait succeeded admirably."³²

According to Max's notes, the chief wore a new buckskin big shirt edged with ermine. The decorative shield on the chest was made of dyed porcupine quills sewn in a geometric pattern. The splatters just below the shield symbolize blood, indicating that he

³⁰ Ibid. 243.

³¹ *Travels* 78-79; Thomas 202-203, 218.

³² Thomas 202.

had been wounded in battle. His battle exploits were also pictured at the shoulder. He wore a cap of ermine with a strip of red fabric hanging down to his calves to which eagle feathers were attached. Only Indians who have shown great bravery and courage in battle were allowed to wear this headdress. At the top of his head are antelope horns with tufts of horsehair dyed yellow attached at the tips (no symbolism recorded for this). In his hand is a long spear with feathers. Mato-Topé used this spear to kill his brother's murderer, and the murderer's scalp is stretched on a round frame and hung from the shaft of the spear above the feathers.³³

Soon after this painting was completed, Max and Bodmer left the upper Missouri territory. They sailed home to Europe in the summer of 1834, never to set foot in the Americas again. Several years later, their work was published,³⁴ and that might have been the end of the story except for a tragic twist of fate.

In 1837, an especially virulent strain of smallpox hit the upper Missouri Territory. A smallpox inoculation program for Indians was mandated by congress to begin in 1832, but officials never fully implemented it. Few inoculations were given north of Fort Pierre. Consequently, the tribes along the upper Missouri were decimated by the smallpox epidemic of 1837. Estimates range from 17,000 to 60,000 fatalities. The devastation irrevocably altered the power structure among the tribes of the Territory.³⁵

However, no tribe was hit harder than the Mandan. In July of 1837, the Mandan population was estimated at 1500-1600. Three months later, in October of 1837, only thirty-one Mandan remained alive. Chief Mato-Topé was one of the many Mandan casualties of the epidemic. Today, there are no full-blood Mandan in existence.³⁶ It is primarily through Prince Max's meticulous and thorough ethnological notes together with the exceptionally detailed paintings of Karl Bodmer that the Mandan are known today.

³³ *Travels* 76-77; Thomas 192, 219.

³⁴ *Prints* 49-75 gives a description of the extended process of preparation for publication. Max's 3-volume travel journal, accompanied by a companion edition of Bodmer's atlas of paintings from the expedition, was published in Germany in 1839, France in 1841, and England in 1843. Max's journal was not published in the United States until 1906 as a reprint of the original 1843 English translation by Hannibal Lloyd.

³⁵ Donald Jackson, *Voyages of the Steamboat Yellow Stone* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1985) 64-71, describes the passage and allocation of funds for the legislation mandating smallpox inoculations of Indians in 1832. The program was only partially implemented as officials sought to use the funds for other purposes. Few Indians north of Fort Pierre were inoculated and, as a result, the tribes to the north were severely ravaged when an epidemic occurred in 1837.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 71; Thomas 206 cites 17,000 as "the most reliable estimate" of fatalities. The Translator's Preface in Bodmer 33-36 gives a figure of 60,000 Indians perishing from the smallpox epidemic of 1837. Estimates vary widely, but it is generally agreed that the epidemic significantly devastated the Indian population of the upper Missouri territory, as well as spreading to other areas of the country.