About the Karl Bodmer Collection

During the years 1832 to 1834, the German naturalist Prince Maximilian zu Wied led an expedition to the Upper Missouri region of North America. The description of this journey, *Travels in the Interior of North America*, published after his return to Europe, provided one of the most significant collections of ethnological information available concerning the nineteenth-century American Plains Indian.

This book was illustrated with eighty-one aquatints, the work of Karl Bodmer (1809-1893), a young Swiss artist, who accompanied Maximilian on his journey. The years of Maximilian's expedition were pivotal in American history. As fur traders penetrated farther up the Missouri River and western migration along the Oregon Trail commenced, the end of an era for the Plains Indian began. Maximilian and Bodmer arrived just in time to record the landscapes and cultures that would soon be irrevocably altered. Arriving in St. Louis in the spring of 1833, the prince-explorer and his illustrator traveled up the Missouri by steamer as far as Fort McKenzie in present-day Montana. Along the way Bodmer sketched and painted the passing scenery and the Indians the travelers met.

The significance of Bodmer's illustrations cannot be overemphasized. Few explorers had ever engaged professional artists to document their journeys. Maximilian insisted that the European-trained Bodmer paint with strict attention to detail. The resulting watercolors, upon which the published aquatints were based, had a photographic accuracy that was unequaled and which have subsequently proved invaluable to historians and ethnologists. For over one-hundred-fifty years Bodmer's aquatints have remained the major source of information regarding Plains Indian culture. These works of art were also instrumental in creating the romantic perceptions and misconceptions of these peoples, which endure to this day in art, film, and literature.