

# FROM THE COLLECTIONS

## Brave New World

### Karl Bodmer's Aquatints Detail Native Life on the Frontier

By Bree T. Hocking | Assistant Editor, Audience Engagement & Museum Department



In this aquatint, Bodmer captures the Mandan village Mih-tutta-hang-kusch as well as the traditional use of bull boats to traverse the waterways. SHSND

In mid-2021 when the State Historical Society took over management of the Lewis & Clark Interpretive Center in Washburn from the North Dakota Parks and Recreation Department, it also assumed guardianship of a unique artistic legacy: the Interpretive Center's complete set of Swiss artist Karl Bodmer's eighty-one aquatints based on works he made during a nineteenth-century expedition to the upper Missouri River. (Aquatints are watercolor-like engravings created using plates etched with nitric acid.)

Bodmer was only twenty-three when he set off in the employ of the German naturalist and explorer Prince Maximilian of Wied-Neuwied to help document this journey. Their 1832–34 odyssey would take them across the Atlantic and deep into the US interior, where at St. Louis (after consulting with such figures as William Clark) they traveled by boat to a string of

American Fur Company posts, including forts Clark, Union, and McKenzie. One of the first European artists to accurately depict the upper Missouri landscape and its inhabitants, Bodmer did so at a moment when disease and displacement would soon threaten many Native communities' survival.

Printed using both copper and steel plates, Bodmer's aquatints were initially published in 1839–41 to illustrate Maximilian's account of their journey, *Travels in the Interior of North America*. The Interpretive Center's set is a contemporary edition produced in the early 1990s using the original plates and tinted by hand. It was purchased from the London-based Alecto Historical Editions with funds from Bismarck philanthropist Alvera Bergquist in 1998, after an earlier deal fell through for the company to sell the last available set to a Saudi oil prince.

An undeniable grace infuses Bodmer's work, a respect and appreciation for his subjects that comes across in these highly detailed tableaux and vignettes. The studies for some of my favorites were made on the expedition's return trip to Fort Clark, where they spent the winter of 1833–34. During their stay, Bodmer befriended Mandan chief Mató-Tópe (Four Bears), painting him in all his sartorial splendor, decked in full headdress and ermine-trimmed tunic but also in the bare-chested warrior-style befitting a member of the Dog Society.



Two views of Mató-Tópe. SHSND

This rapport between artist and subject fueled a virtuous cycle of artistic cross-pollination—Bodmer even lent Mató-Tópe art supplies and encouraged him to produce his own self-portraits. The Mandan chief decorated a bison robe (subsequently bought by Maximilian and now housed in Stuttgart's Linden-Museum) with scenes of his prowess in battle. In turn, Bodmer rendered the ornate robe in watercolor, later adding a border of American Indian artifacts collected on the journey in the printed aquatint.



In *Indian Utensils and Arms*, Bodmer meticulously replicated Mató-Tópe's bison robe. SHSND

For staff at the Interpretive Center, where a rotation of nine aquatints is always on display, the ethnographic precision of these works makes them a valuable visual aide, offering insight into Native culture and civilization. Site Supervisor Dana Morrison points to an image of the Mandan village Mih-tutta-hang-kusch near Fort Clark, which shows not only the tub-shaped bull boats used by tribal members but also the "strategic" positioning of their earthlodge villages on a bluff overlooking the river, as particularly telling. "They knew what worked best," she said.