The Natural Face of North America
A Public Portal to the Maximilian-Bodmer Collection at Joslyn Art Museum

A team led by Creighton University faculty has received a $350,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to develop a digital portal to increase public access, exposure, and interpretation of Joslyn’s Maximilian–Bodmer collection. The portal, The Natural Face of North America, is a collaboration with Joslyn Art Museum and the Nebraska Indian Community College.

Joslyn’s Maximilian-Bodmer collection hosts the most complete archive of material from Prince Maximilian of Wied (German, 1782–1867) and Karl Bodmer’s (Swiss, 1809–93) expedition across North America between 1832 and 1834. The pair meticulously documented the people, plants, animals, and landscapes they encountered during their 7,000-mile journey from New England to present-day Montana and back. Joslyn’s collection includes more than 400 of Bodmer’s watercolors and drawings and Maximilian’s handwritten journals, which were recently translated and published in the three-volume The North American Journals of Prince Maximilian of Wied.

The project brings the Journals to a digital platform, linking them for the first time to Bodmer’s watercolor and graphite illustrations and a multi-layered digital map of their journey. Project staff will digitize, geocode, and markup Maximilian’s journal entries and Bodmer’s watercolors and drawings, which are housed at Joslyn, unifying these two resources. Users will be able to browse and search the collection or follow the expedition using a georeferenced historic map, creating a fully-integrated research experience that allows for multiple entry points into text and image.

In addition to enabling international access to this material for scholars and the public, the portal will include a set of interpretive essays by experts in history, geography, art history, and Native American cultures. Project leaders will develop a curriculum to provide preK-12 students a body of knowledge about nineteenth-century Native American life through exposure, and interpretation of the collection. Curriculum development will rely on consultation and discussion with members of Native American nations represented in the Maximilian-Bodmer corpus to ensure its representativeness and accuracy. The Natural Face of North America will be the most comprehensive public resource for the Maximilian–Bodmer expedition, facilitating new understandings of the peoples and landscapes of the nineteenth-century American West in a critical period of transition. The current phase of the project is slated for completion by 2024.

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