Paul Kane devoted a lifetime to recording a wilderness world known as the 'Great Nor-West.' From 1845 to 1848, Kane crisscrossed the northwest quadrant of North America, sketching and painting everywhere he went. Kane's travels are the stuff of legend. He endured extremes of heat and cold, suffered dangers and braved adversity, and forced himself to the limit time and again in order to document the lives of Native peoples of North America.

Determined to make a lasting record of the North American Indian, the thirty-five-year-old artist Paul Kane set out in 1845 to cross the continent 'with no companions but my portfolio and box of paints, my gun, and a stock of ammunition.' Travelling with unbelievable resolution on foot and on horseback, by fur-trade canoe, dog team, and snowshoe, he made his way from the Great Lakes to the Pacific coast and back again, documenting the lives and customs of nearly eighty Indian tribes in the territory romantically known as the Great Nor-West.

What drove Kane across the continent was his belief that this almost unknown wilderness would soon be destroyed by European westward expansion. In many ways, Kane's premise was confirmed by his experiences in the West. In the spring of 1846, he witnessed one of the last great buffalo hunts along what is now the Manitoba-Dakota border. Within a few years, time, the vast herds were no more and a centuries-old way of life based on the buffalo hunt was fading away. Kane's eerie ride through a scattering of human bones on Long Grass Prairie was but one of many reminders of the tragic decimation of Native peoples from smallpox, tuberculosis, and a host of other deadly diseases brought by European traders and missionaries.

In the spring of 1847, Kane travelled the Pacific coast, sketching canoes and cedar lodges, making watercolours of medicine masks and burial sites, taking portraits of important chiefs along Juan de Fuca Strait, and trading for blankets, masks, rattles, tools, and many other objects from the Northwest coast. These sketches and artifacts are now considered one of the most important ethnological records of the Native cultures of the Northwest.

Kane returned to his Toronto studio in the fall of 1848, carrying with him some five hundred pencil, watercolour, and oil-on-paper field sketches, as well as a remarkable collection of Indian 'Curiosities.' Using the sketches and artifacts as raw material, Kane painted a cycle of one hundred oils depicting scenes of Indian life. Carefully composed and executed in accordance with nineteenth-century standards of taste, these impressive canvases assured Kane's reputation as an artist. Less widely known but perhaps of greater interest to contemporary viewers are the field sketches that Kane brought back from the West.


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