

# WHITMAN MISSION REVISITED



Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto

The limits of field sketching are evident in this presumed drawing of Marcus Whitman.



## *Early drawings return to the Northwest.*

In 1847, shortly before the murders of Marcus and Narcissa Whitman and several others and the destruction of the mission buildings, the Canadian artist Paul Kane visited the site and was "received very kindly by the missionary and his wife." While there he sketched the mission, two Cayuse Indians and an Indian fan belonging to Mrs. Whitman, and made drawings purported to be the only surviving illustrations of the Whitmans. Although photography was in practice in the eastern U.S., the technology did not arrive in the West until several years after the death of the Whitmans.

Paul Kane spent his childhood in York (now known as Toronto), where at 23 he began his career as a sign painter. A year later, in 1834, he was painting professionally as a portraitist, traveling as far as New Orleans, Louisiana, and Mobile, Alabama, in pursuit of his profession.

In 1841, Kane traveled to Europe to sharpen his artistic talent. In London, he met George Catlin, the first artist of any importance to visit the West in order to paint Indians. After nearly four years in Europe, Kane returned to Canada. He later wrote, "I determined to devote whatever talents and proficiency I possessed to the painting of a series of pictures illustrative of the North American Indians and scenery."

In preparation for this work, Kane spent the summer of 1845 in the Great Lakes region painting the leading chieftains. There he practiced living outdoors and learned the cultural skills necessary for him to be accepted by Native Americans. In 1846, Kane spent the winter at

**By David Herrera**

Fort Vancouver. The following spring and summer, he traveled in and around the Northwest attempting to capture the landscape and Indian tribes before the advancing American settlement overwhelmed their culture. He published an account of his travels in 1859, entitled *Wanderings of an Artist*.



In the book, Kane described his visit in July 1847 with Dr. Whitman, who took him to a Cayuse lodge where he sketched Tomakus. The Indian attempted to throw the sketch in the fire, but Kane snatched it from him. "He ... appeared greatly enraged, but before he had time to recover from his surprise I left the lodge and mounted my horse, not without occasionally looking back to see if he might not send an arrow after me."

Kane returned to Toronto in 1848, carrying with him his field sketches. He successfully exhibited them, translating many into formal canvas paintings. This collection brought him some notoriety. However, growing blindness, first noticeable in 1859, began to isolate him from other people. Kane scarcely touched a brush after that date. Without new paintings to maintain public interest, Kane became a forgotten figure.

Paul Kane died on February 20, 1871. Many of his drawings came to be housed in the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. Now, for the first time, the sketches of the Whitmans, the mission and "Narcissa's Indian fan" will be loaned to the Whitman Mission National Historic Site in Walla Walla. The Royal Ontario Museum has agreed to loan the sketches from April through November 1989.

The drawings will be exhibited in the newly redesigned and refurbished visitor-center museum at Whitman Mission, where visitors will see lifelike Indian mannequins in colorful, hand-made clothing, original artwork, historical artifacts excavated at the mission site and many interesting exhibits of the Whitman's mission and the Cayuse Indians.

*David Herrera is superintendent of the Whitman Mission National Historic Site in Walla Walla.*



Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto

ABOVE: Kane's drawing of Narcissa Whitman shows the famous missionary as contemplative, perhaps even melancholy.

BELOW: Whitman Mission: a famed stop on the Overland Trail to Oregon and one of the most important historic sites in the Northwest.



Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto

# COLUMBIA

*The Magazine of Northwest History*

A quarterly publication of the  
Washington State Historical Society

VOLUME THREE, NUMBER ONE

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*Columbia* (ISSN: 0892-3094) is published quarterly by the Washington State Historical Society, 315 N. Stadium Way, Tacoma, WA 98403; (206) 593-2830. Entire contents © 1989 by the Washington State Historical Society. All rights reserved. Nothing may be reprinted in whole or in part without written permission from the publisher. *Editorial contributions:* All unsolicited manuscripts and photographs submitted must include return postage (in stamps) and suitable packaging to ensure their safe return. Although reasonable care will be taken with materials received, no responsibility can be assumed for unsolicited materials, including photographs. *Postmaster:* Please send address changes to *Columbia*, 315 N. Stadium Way, Tacoma, WA 98403.

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*Cover:* Bird's-eye view maps, popular tools of civic promotion in the late 19th century, provide a fascinating glimpse into community history (see story on page 3). This artist's rendering of Olympia, East Olympia and Tumwater was published in 1879; it was illustrated by E. S. Glover and lithographed by A. L. Bancroft & Co., San Francisco. In 10 short years after the completion of Glover's sketch, the rustic frontier town of Olympia became, though relatively little changed, the state capital. (Courtesy of the Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.)