**Early Life and First Journeys**

John Mix Stanley was born in 1814 in Canandaigua, New York and grew up in nearby Buffalo. As a young man, Stanley painted signs and houses for a living, but in 1834 he moved to Detroit where he met James Bowman, an experienced portrait painter who became his teacher.

Between 1837 and 1840, Stanley traveled throughout Michigan, Wisconsin, and Illinois painting portraits for wealthy patrons. He encountered members of the Dakota and Ojibwe tribes on these early journeys, and turned to Native Americans as subjects for his paintings. Returning to the East Coast in 1840, Stanley painted portraits in New York City, Philadelphia, and Baltimore before eventually settling in Troy, New York.

In late 1842, Stanley and recent business partner Caleb Sumner Dickerman traveled to Fort Gibson in Indian Territory (present day Oklahoma). Beginning in 1817 and continuing through 1846, the government’s policy of Indian Removal forced thousands of Native Americans living peacefully within southern states to relocate to territory west of the Mississippi River. During his three years in Indian Territory, Stanley sketched about eighty portraits of Native Americans from seventeen tribes. He also completed the monumental work *International Indian Council* (1843).

**Journeys Across the Southwest**

Achieving only modest success with his first few exhibitions, Stanley decided to head southwest for inspiration. He joined a caravan traveling along the Santa Fe Trail. On the journey, Stanley met William H. Emory, a topographical engineer and officer in Stephen Watts Kearny’s “Army of the West.” Kearny’s forces were charged with conquering land in present-day New Mexico and California during the Mexican-American War.

Emory hired Stanley to accompany Kearny’s army from Santa Fe to San Diego. Stanley sketched the landscape, local flora and fauna, camp life, and Native American tribes. They faced significant hardships on the journey—periods of deprivation and the perpetual danger of attack. Once in California, Stanley left Kearny’s army and traveled to San Francisco to create paintings based on his field studies. He sent some of his studio paintings to Emory, who had them made into lithographs. These lithographs were published two years later in Emory’s report of the expedition.

Stanley added a few of his southwestern paintings to his major life’s work, his Indian Gallery. These paintings presented idealized visions of the southwestern landscape and introduced his Euro-American audiences to southwestern tribes such as the Pomo and Apache.

**Journey Across the Northern United States**

In the 1850s, Congress debated the best course for a transcontinental railroad. This resulted in four east to west expeditions conducted by the Army’s Corps of Topographical Engineers. Isaac I. Stevens, governor of Washington Territory, was in charge of surveying the proposed northern route which became the Northern Pacific Railroad with its original terminus in Tacoma. He hired Stanley as his expedition’s principal artist. Their six-month trip from Saint Paul, Minnesota to Puget Sound would be Stanley’s last journey west. As a pivotal member of the survey team, Stanley led special expeditions and acted as a mediator in interactions with Native Americans. The artist’s warm relationship with the Piegan Indians even helped Stevens secure a treaty with them.

Stanley employed a daguerreotype camera on this trip to capture the likenesses of his Native American subjects. He used these photographs, now lost, as source material for Indian Gallery paintings and gave them as gifts to his sitters. After Stanley returned to Washington, D.C., he spent the next five years working on drawings for two volumes of the Pacific Railroad Reports. He contributed more images than any other expeditionary artist.

**After the Journeys**

When Congress refused to acquire his Indian Gallery, Stanley began looking for another buyer. The Michigan state legislature was considering the purchase when, in 1865, tragedy struck. The Smithsonian gallery housing his Indian Gallery paintings went up in flames. Only seven of 150 original works survived the blaze. The destruction of Stanley’s Indian Gallery was a monumental loss for the artist and for the nation.

Stanley spent the remaining years of his life exploring numerous avenues that might sustain his stature as an American artist and his vision of Native Americans as important subjects in American art. Drawing upon his travels, he painted a variety of individual portraits that were reproduced in multiples as relatively inexpensive chromolithographs. He also planned, but never completed, a one-hundred color-plate portfolio of scenes from Native American life in the West. In addition, Stanley painted a number of portraits of Detroit citizens, eastern landscapes, and local genre scenes.

Although almost all of Stanley’s treasured Indian Gallery paintings were destroyed, nearly 230 of his works survive today. These, along with the records of his courageous travels, establish his legacy as one of the most important American artists of his time. Stanley was a gifted painter with an indomitable spirit. His unrivaled sense of adventure and civic duty drove him from his portrait studio to the frontier, where he was inspired to depict a remarkable chapter of America’s antebellum history.