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Forty-first President of the Western History Association
Drawn to the West

Brian W. Dippie

Historic western American art is best understood as myth in visual form. My essay argues that art enshrines the ideals of nineteenth-century white Americans who saw the West as a promised land. Western art’s contested reputation today results from its tendency to celebrate frontier expansion as fundamental to the shaping of a distinctive national character.

Our conference theme this year is “The Boundless West: Imagery and Popular Culture.” It reflects my own abiding interest in the art of the American West. My work has focused on imagery. I like words and love pictures. To paraphrase Paul Klee, “Art does not reproduce what we see. Rather, it makes us see.”1 As a historian of the American West, my interest turns on what western art makes us see—what it shows, and what it means. To see a feathered Indian is to encounter an allegorical premise. The Trail’s End is near. A single buffalo skull is an entire historical narrative. An Indian with raised tomahawk validates Manifest Destiny. A wagon train creaking into the setting sun is the future washed in gold. Western art, to put it baldly, is western myth in visual form. And that western myth remains an essential part of any history of the American West. [See Figure 1.]

Seen from a distance—from foreign shores, even those located along the forty-ninth parallel—the western myth is not only the most interesting thing about America, but also the most revealing. Foreigners will ever be in quest of the key that unlocks American culture, and founding myths are attractive for their explanatory powers.2

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From a European perspective, it makes sense to see America as the little transplant that could—and did. "Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way," an Irish bishop wrote in 1728:

The four first Acts
already past,
A fifth shall close the
Drama with the Day;
The world's great
Effort is the last.3

Discredited usages like "Old World" and "New World" once served to draw distinctions and to suggest continuity—Western Civ, and all that. Is studying the mythic West a Eurocentric enterprise? Of course. But then from the perspective of Europe, America was a European enterprise. Just over a year ago the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming, and the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Alberta, teamed to sponsor a

traveling symposium called “One West, Two Myths: Comparing Canadian and American Perspectives.” How could two nations whose western boundary is simply an artificial line drawn along the 49th parallel, and who shared in common their connection to the British Empire, have produced distinctive societies with measurably different social values and, most pertinent for purposes of the symposium, contrasting myths about their Wests?4

When the third and final leg of the symposium convened in Berlin in July this year, its host was the John F. Kennedy Center for North American Studies at the Free University, its coverage had been expanded to include Mexico, and its title had changed to “Narrating Frontiers: Transgressions and Exchanges along North American Borders.” Let me add that since it was an international conference drawing heavily on European expertise in critical studies, the approach was resolutely literary and the water got pretty deep for the few historians and sole archeologist in attendance. But the mythic West still cast a long shadow over the proceedings, appropriately enough, given the bruising German-American relations had suffered during the lead-up to the Iraq war and a tendency abroad to consider President George W. Bush a “cowboy” in the modern, pejorative sense of that word.5 Too, the John F. Kennedy Institute was in the midst of celebrating the fortieth anniversary of President Kennedy’s speech denouncing a border that, in 1963, literally divided East and West. The Berlin Wall, he had insisted, was “an offence not only against history but an offence against humanity.” It would one day fall—“freedom is indivisible”—and, on behalf of free people everywhere, he joined the people of Berlin in their struggle by proclaiming himself a Berliner, too.6 In short, at the “Narrating Frontiers” conference, America loomed large as fact and even larger as symbol. The myth of the West was not some tired conceit; it was palpable, and pressingly important.

The explanatory power of frontiering seems undeniable. In time, something transformed what was into what is—a European transplant into an original phenomenon.7 Bishop Berkeley himself, having proclaimed that “Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way,” subsequently modified his concluding line, “The world’s great Effort is the last,” to read instead, “Time’s noblest Offspring is the last.” That is the version we choose to remember today.8 Americans celebrated the centennial of their republic soon after

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5 Alex Strachan, “Lone Justice: How the West is Being Won (in the Middle East),” Vancouver Sun (British Columbia), 5 April 2003.


7 A vigorous defense of the exceptionalist premise is mounted in Jack P. Greene, The Intellectual Construction of America: Exceptionalism and Identity from 1492 to 1800 (Chapel Hill, NC, 1993). Exceptionalism is hard to lay to rest. After all, thinking you are different constitutes a case for exceptionalism.

8 “Verses by the Author on the prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America,” Luce and Jessup, Works of George Berkeley, 373.
a convulsive civil war had exposed racial and sectional divisions that threatened its continued existence. As a reuniting nation with its continental borders fully attained, the United States in 1876 was emerging as a global power, increasingly unsure of the very openness that had made it, to quote Kennedy again, "a nation of immigrants." An explanation for its rapid rise to greatness among the older powers of the world was in order. That the best known explanation was advanced in an address delivered in conjunction with a world's fair celebrating the 400th anniversary of Columbus's "discovery" of the New World—a fair held in Chicago (the West within a human lifespan, but now an eastern city)—may not have impressed contemporaries, but it has impressed friends and foes of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis ever since.9

"The Significance of the Frontier in American History" offered an explanation for what made "time's noblest Offspring" different. It became the gold standard for the exceptionalist premise. Exceptional means distinctive, of course, not wonderful, and exceptionalism can accommodate triumphalism and triumphalism's opposite, self-rejection. But clearly triumphalism holds the upper hand in Turner. Overwhelmingly, the qualities he attributed to the frontier experience were entered on the credit side of the ledger—strength, acuteness, inquisitiveness, a "practical, inventive turn of mind," a "masterful grasp of material things," a "restless, nervous energy," a "dominant individualism," "that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom," freshness, confidence, and a "scorn of older society," which translates as a love for democracy—noble qualities all. Only a lack in the artistic and that "dominant individualism" when it works for "evil" fall into the debit column.10 It does not require an accountant to recognize that Turner's balance sheet is robustly in favor of America's frontier legacy. Still, there is that nagging, worrisome question at the end: What now?—What now that frontiering is finished? Turner's thesis, triumphalistic, but also deeply fretful about the ending of the very process of frontiering that it celebrated—the closing of "the first period of American history"—was not so much history as founding myth. And as myth, not history, it has proven astonishingly resilient because myth (to quote one dictionary definition) is "any real or fictional story, recurring theme, or character type that appeals to the consciousness of a people by embodying its cultural ideals or by giving expression to deep, commonly felt emotions."11 As such, myth is "highly impervious to refutation by a show of facts to the contrary."12

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9 George W. Pine, Beyond the West: containing an account of two years' travel . . . (Utica, NY, 1870), 45.

10 Frederick J. Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1893 (Washington, DC, 1894), 227; Also see Wrobel, The End of American Exceptionalism.


The myth-symbol school of the 1950s, linked to Henry Nash Smith’s seminal *Virgin Land* and since so thoroughly repudiated as essentialist, reductive, and, of course, triumphalist (terms not even in the 1969 dictionary that provided the common sense definition of myth just quoted), has reappeared, changed but still recognizable, in the flood of recent writing on national memory and historical consciousness. One could even predict a return to national character studies. Certainly events since 11 September have given little comfort to those like Thomas L. Haskell who, in 2000, hoped that historical debate in America would abandon exceptionalism and anti-exceptionalism alike and embrace a “splendidly aloof” post-exceptionalist perspective that would “forthrightly admit that sweeping claims and counterclaims about the similarity or difference of entire nations will forever elude empirical resolution.” It may be, as Haskell wrote, that exceptionalism is a “barren conundrum” and that searching in the supposed “uniqueness of national experience” for “an explanatory key that unlocks all doors” is a fruitless activity. But Haskell’s hopes for a post-exceptionalist paradise have been dashed by the plethora of commentators who in the past year began their observations on international affairs with “[t]he French are . . .” or “[t]he Germans are . . .” or “Americans are . . .” Even Canadians went from being irritating, but nice, to just being irritating. As the world’s superpower, America, of course, comes in for most of the scrutiny. The search continues for that elusive “explanatory key.” And where that search leads, the West will not be far behind.


15 See *American Review of Canadian Studies* 33 (Spring 2003), special issue, “Weathering the Storm: The State of the Canada-U.S. Relationship, 2003.” Wringing its hands over a tourist drought in the summer of 2003, the *Times Colonist* (Victoria, BC) on 1 August published a letter from Douglas Buchanan of Bishop, CA who spoke about Americans when they get serious: “… we have little time for critics. We also lose our motive for buying their wine (France) and visiting their countries (France, Germany, Canada) because we have more important things on our minds.”
So we turn to western myth and the ideas and values it embodies. Conventional wisdom, Marvin Meyers wrote in the heyday of national character studies, holds that rhetoric is never to be trusted. Long before the post-modernists, students of literature and political oratory knew that they were dealing with unreliable narrators, and that hidden meanings would have to be teased out of texts. Still, there was confidence that the effort was worthwhile, in the spirit of the remark that in order to understand America's mythic capital, Hollywood, you had to scrape through the tinsel to get to the real tinsel underneath. Rhetoric disguises and confuses; it also reveals. It is a verbal strategy adopted for a purpose. The words most often associated with the West in the rhetoric of the first half of the nineteenth century involved space and opportunity and freedom and the future. "The East is old, pretty fully peopled, and small," Massachusetts's Daniel Webster told an audience in Pittsburgh in 1833, when Pittsburgh, like Chicago, was still the West. "We are bounded; you are boundless." The Transcendentalists poured it on. Thoreau could not abide the actualities of westward expansion—"Going to California," he observed, "is only three thousand miles nearer to hell." Still, he doted on the idea of going West: "Westward is heaven . . . or rather heavenward is the West." An essayist in 1857 echoed Bishop Berkeley by writing:

> The West has always been the land of hope and progress . . . the land not of the past, but of the future. . . . We are beginning to feel, as none others have done before us, the true import of this word, the West. It is a protest against the existing evils of society; as if one should say, Let me leave this place where mind is trammeled, where I cannot develop all my powers as I would, and let me go where all this can be accomplished—let me go West.

There would be hardships, of course, to test the hardest of individuals. "He who seeks the West must submit to toil, danger, privation, disease, and perhaps early death. . . ." And some would have to be sacrificed: "The aborigines must be driven out or exterminated in the beginning." But the price of progress was as nothing if the West became

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what its dreamers dreamed: "a blessing to the world, an addition to its civilization and refinement, and the theater for a more perfect development of humanity than preceding ages and Eastern climes have ever realized."19

This "great nation of futurity," as John L. O'Sullivan described the United States in 1839, in a warm-up for Manifest Destiny's full-throated cry, had reached maturity

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19 Delta, "Westward," Emerson's United States Magazine 5 (August 1857): 186, 189–90. Attributing the prediction to Walt Whitman, in 1947 Henry Nash Smith wrote: "In the West will appear a new politics and a new literature, appropriate to the turbulent and audacious America of the future." See Henry Nash Smith, "Walt Whitman and Manifest Destiny," Huntington Library Quarterly 10 (August 1947): 375. Thoreau entertained grave doubts about Manifest Destiny, but anticipated Whitman's point in an 1843 journal entry: "We must look to the West for the growth of a new literature—manners—architecture &c. Already there is more language there—which is the growth of the soil,—than here." (Quoted in Willson, "The Transcendentalist View of the West," 190.) Also see Gay Wilson Allen on Whitman, "The Influence of Space on the American Imagination," in Essays on American Literature in Honor of Jay B. Hubbell, ed. Clarence Gohdes (Durham, NC, 1967), 329–42 and Edwin Fussell, Frontier: American Literature and the American West (Princeton, NJ, 1965), for a sustained argument that the West is essential "for an understanding of early American literature," and that literature, in turn, is essential for an understanding of the West's formative influence in the shaping of an American character prior to the Civil War (quote on p. 3). Moving beyond literary images, Rush Welter argued that ordinary Americans before the Civil War came to see in the West "an almost limitless extension of the social and economic and political values they associated with their country at large," thus substituting utilitarian motives for literary idealism in characterizing the West as America's repository of opportunity and hope. See Rush Welter, "The Frontier West as Image of American Society, 1776–1860," Pacific Northwest Quarterly 52 (January 1961): 1–6 (quote on p. 2) and "The Frontier West as Image of American Society: Conservative Attitudes before the Civil War," Mississippi Valley Historical Review 66 (March 1960): 593–614, which traces a shift in eastern attitudes whereby the West, once deplored as a drain on New England's resources, was reconceptualized as a "middle-class utopia" that "embodied the lasting hopes of the American nation." As the dates of these citations indicate, such broad-gauged studies in intellectual history have not been in fashion for years. Indeed, with the exception of an essay by Rush Welter titled "On Studying the National Mind," New Directions in American Intellectual History, ed. John Higham and Paul K. Conklin (Baltimore, MD, 1979), vividly documented the complete collapse of "consensus history" and national character studies. "In the 1950s intellectual history had seemed to offer the master key that could unlock the deepest secrets of the American past," Higham wrote in the introduction: "By the late 1960s all claims issued in the name of an 'American mind,' a national 'myth,' a 'climate of opinion,' or a 'liberal tradition' were subject to drastic skepticism." (p. xii) But Fred Erisman's "Thoreau, Alcott, and the Mythic West," Western American Literature 34 (Fall 1999): 303–15 (quote on p. 303), is a sign of a renewed interest in (to paraphrase Wallace Stegner) the rhetoric of hope that extends the discussion of what Erisman describes as Thoreau's well recognized "part in shaping the American sense of the mythic West" to include Louisa May Alcott. Leo P. Ribuffo, "What Is Still Living in 'Consensus' History and Pluralist Social Theory," American Studies International 38 (February 2000): 42–60 (quote on p. 56), concludes that "we should not reject out of hand the possibility that most Americans have shared significant beliefs and values, though the components of this 'consensus' has certainly varied over the centuries."
by 1893, when Turner delivered his paper in Chicago. Critics in the heyday of consensus history faulted Turner for confusing the literal West with its more potent form, the metaphorical West, which had indeed shaped a national self-consciousness, but had run its course by the end of the Civil War—long before the superintendent of the census declared an end to the frontier. "Twentieth-century sentimental-antiquarian West-mongering was just around the corner," Edwin Fussell noted in dismissing Turner. What he meant was what the novelist Frank Norris meant in a 1902 essay titled "The Frontier Gone at Last":

... on the first of May, eighteen hundred and ninety-eight, a gun was fired in the Bay of Manila. ... Then came a cry for help from Legation Street in Peking and as the first . . . contingent of American marines took ground on the Asian shore, the Frontier . . . dwindled down and vanished; for the Anglo-Saxon in his course of empire had circled the globe and had brought the new civilization to the old civilization, had reached the starting point of history, the place from which the migration began. So soon as the marines landed there was no longer any West, and the equation of the horizon, the problem of the centuries for the Anglo-Saxon was solved.

So, lament it though we may, . . . the one peculiar picturesqueness of our life is no more. We may keep alive for many years yet the idea of a Wild West, but the hired cowboys and paid rough riders of Mr. William Cody are more like "the real thing" than can be found today in Arizona, New Mexico or Idaho. Only the imitation cowboys, the college-bred fellows who "go out on a ranch" carry the revolver. . . . The Frontier has become conscious of itself, acts the part for the Eastern visitor; and this

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20 John L. O'Sullivan, "The Great Nation of Futurity," United States Magazine and Democratic Review 6 (November 1839): 426–30. This and other specimens of the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny are reprinted in Manifest Destiny, ed. Norman A. Graebner (Indianapolis, 1968), 15–21; Graebner excludes two fine examples, both also published in the United States Magazine and Democratic Review (see below), notable since they bookend Bernard De Voto's "Year of Decision," moving from prophecy to fulfillment in the compass of a single year, 1846. The language closely anticipates Turner's case for American exceptionalism, noting that "[a]s numbers increased and years rolled on, the impress of the Old World faded more and more away" and political democracy gained a secure foothold, establishing America's "great mission . . . to extend to all the people of the American continent . . . institutions based upon the light of reason and truth, upon the benefits and inherent and equal rights of all men. . . ." See "America in 1846: The Past—The Future," United States Magazine and Democratic Review 18 (January 1846): 57–64 (quotes on pp. 62, 64). With war with Mexico a fact by February 1847, its "annihilation as a nation" was predicted, along with the fulfillment of America's continental destiny: "The busy and enterprising settlers have descended from the Alleghanies, occupied the plains, pushed across mighty streams, traversed the prairies, penetrated the passes of the Rocky mountains, and are even now loading vessels in the harbors of the Pacific . . ." See "The War," United States Magazine and Democratic Review 20 (February 1847): 99–102 (quotes on pp. 101, 99).

21 Fussell, Frontier, 435 and Smith, Virgin Land, 250–60.
self-consciousness is a sign, surer than all others, of the decadence of a
type, the passing of an epoch.22

Critics aside, Turner's magic year of 1890 still resonates in any reckoning of the West's
mythic history. Its beginnings reach back to a time when there was no America except
as an unnamed idea in the Old World's imaginings of the West, but Berkeley's fifth
act must close the drama with the day. Westering constitutes a conventional narrative
in which the ending is as important as the beginning. By 1890, opinion-makers and
public alike were sorting out the components of America's western myth, enshrining
the buckskin-clad hunter-hero, the blue-clad soldier, the cowboy and, of course, the
Indian in a visual construct representing the Old West. Popular histories and biog-
raphies, dime novels and the periodical press were addicted to western stories and
colorful western types. Buffalo Bill had toured Europe by then and made the Wild
West a part of European culture, too.23 The myth, though fitfully, was assuming its
recognizable modern form.

Edward Eggleston's 1889 The Household History of the United States for Young
Americans provides a revealing take on where matters stood when it was published.
Boone, according to Eggleston, was the representative of "a new race of men," utterly
self-reliant and forged by frontier conditions, but there is no Crockett, Carson, or Cody.
And no Billys or Jesses or Calamitys or Wild Bills, of course. The Alamo? One sentence:
"Santa Anna marched against the Texans, and at the taking of Fort Alamo"—Fort
Alamo!—"he put to death all opposed to him, and he also executed five hundred men
at Goliad." Mountain men? No Jim Bridger or Jedediah Smith or Bill Sublette. Not even
a John Jacob Astor. Mormons? Their religion "allows the practice of polygamy," and
"for this reason, Congress has hitherto been unwilling to admit Utah to the Union." 
Texas annexation, the war with Mexico, and California are discussed as political is-
issues. No Donner Party, no Fort Laramie or Oregon Trail, and precious little Oregon.
"A certain Captain Gray, from Boston," gets a paragraph, and Lewis and Clark are
handled in two sentences. Needless to say, York and Sacagawea go unmentioned. In
1889, the heroic phase of westering—for Eggleston as for Theodore Roosevelt when
he launched his history The Winning of the West that year—was "the settlement of the
great valley," the area between the Appalachians and the Mississippi. But just the year
before, in 1888, Roosevelt had partnered with Frederic Remington, a New York artist
who was already the rising star of western illustration, in a series of essays on "Ranch
Life in the Far West." The locus of the myth was shifting.24

23 See, for example, Montana The Magazine of Western History 42 (Spring 1992), spe-
cial issue devoted to "The European's American West." See also, Ray Allen Billington, Land of
Savagery, Land of Promise: The European Image of the American Frontier in the Nineteenth
24 Edward Eggleston, The Household History of the United States for Young Americans
(New York, 1889), 232–3 (quote on p. 232), 285, 361, 293–4 (quote on p. 293), 231. See also
Eggleston’s Household History boasts only one plate that could be considered a Wild Western, an engraving of a Remington painting titled Battle of Washita. [See Figure 2.] It is an early work, at once awkward, theatrical, and bombastic. Eggleston described Black Kettle’s “town on the Washita River, in the Indian Territory,” where the soldiers in 1868 “fell upon the sleeping savages at daybreak, defeating them with great slaughter.” How exactly this could stir the soul of an artist who idolized the brave boys in blue is unclear. Remington showed the troops charging down a broad avenue between clusters of tipis mowing down Indian men who, taken by surprise, are virtually defenseless. A few women react to the solid wall of advancing soldiers with evident shock. “Great slaughter” of the defenseless is not the stuff of which heroic epics are made.

In 1876, however, as Eggleston dutifully reported, Custer attacked another Indian village, this one wide awake. Badly outnumbered, he "was surrounded and killed, with all the men under his immediate command."25 Custer's Last Stand was a centennial gift for artists, a precious "epic of defeat." This was soul-stirring stuff. Boy Generals. Savage foes. Self-sacrifice. Unflinching courage. No survivors. Walt Whitman responded to the news of Custer's death by celebrating a "lesson opportune": "Continues yet the old, old legend of our race! / The loftiest of life upheld by death!"26 By spinning conquest to make the victors the victims, the Last Stand dramatized the terrible price of pioneering progress. In 1890, Remington exchanged that headlong charge through a sleeping Indian village for something far more congenial, a desperate defense by white soldiers against hopeless odds. [See Figure 3.] Remington called his painting The Last Stand, making the particular generic. When the picture was reproduced in Harper's Weekly on 10 January 1891, less than two weeks after Wounded Knee, an editorial note asked, "How many scenes of which this is typical have been enacted on this continent, who can say?"27 Eventually, Custer's Last Stand entrenched itself as the representative event of the Indian wars, and children's school texts ignored the Washita in favor of heroic images of Custer's grand finale. That was still the case when I was growing up, and, to this day, Custer's Last Stand fascinates me as an idea created by artists who, in giving it visual form, established the power of repetition to burn images into the collective consciousness. And what they created is potently mythic. Repetitions range from knowing quotation or homage to outright rip off. The appeal of formula fiction resides in its predictability, and the pleasure a reader takes in the wrinkles introduced by a given writer. But novelty is not an end in itself. The test is whether a writer can introduce novelty without deviating fundamentally from formula. Mystery readers

25 Eggleston, Household History of the United States, both this quote and the one in the preceding paragraph are on p. 362. Eggleston reassured his young readers that Custer's death in 1876 had only hastened the inevitable: "The bison . . . have now been exterminated by the march of civilized man. The old life to which the savages were so much attached is fast breaking down. All the hunting-grounds will soon be occupied by farms, mines, and cities. There is nothing left for the Indians but to become civilized or to perish" (p. 364).


want the case solved by book’s end. Romance readers trust the woman will get her man. Western readers expect the hero to prevail. “The purpose is to create a distinct, individual character and pit him against a specific human problem and see how he meets it,” a western writer once remarked. “If he misses, the academic pinheads call it art. . . . Mine don’t miss because I make a living at it.”

Similarly, western painters and sculptors adhering to a representational style have, through repetition and refinement, enshrined certain themes as the themes of western art. Focusing on Custer’s Last Stand allows us to see the process of enshrining certain themes through repetition and refinement at work. Within weeks of Custer’s death, artists had settled on its meaning—its “lesson opportune”—and were working variations on the theme of heroic defiance in the face of certain death. This sort of heroic

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defiance was the lesson Remington had derived from the Last Stand illustration by Alfred R. Waud in a biography of Custer published in the fall of 1876; Remington’s own boyish sketch of the battle done about that time proved his debt to Waud—a debt still apparent when he painted _The Last Stand_ in 1890.\(^{30}\) It paid interest on the debt, and Waud collected two years later in a second version of Custer's Last Stand where Remington’s influence is obvious. Indeed, the earliest Last Stands, Waud’s and one by William Cary published within a month of the battle, inspired so much emulation that an 1878 lithograph borrowed both Custers—a case not just of déjà vu, but double vision.

Emulation is a given in art. Since Remington and Montana’s celebrated “cowboy artist” Charles M. Russell have been among my preoccupations, let me concentrate on their influence on other Last Stands. Remington’s is obvious; he doted on Last Stand groupings throughout his career. But his most unusual contribution to Last Stand imagery is buried within the best-known version ever done, the chromolithograph by Otto Becker after a painting by Cassilly Adams. First distributed as advertising art by Anheuser-Busch in 1896, _Custer’s Last Fight_, as it was titled, has long since attained iconic status for its flamboyant melodrama played out against an accurate backdrop, its gory details, and its charging Indians armed with Zulu spears and clubs and cowhide shields: Here come the Sioux-lu! But my favorite touch is that concession to realism provided by three Remington sketches incorporated into the action. Remington himself was a master myth-maker—witness his _The Last Stand_—but even in his role as reporter illustrating life on southwestern reservations he had contributed to the mythic structure of Custer’s Last Stand.

Russell, too, played an inadvertent role in a variant on Custer’s Last Stand. David Humphreys Miller, who painted portraits of seventy-one Indian battle veterans he claimed to have interviewed for his 1957 book _Custer’s Fall_, provided the dustjacket art showing Custer receiving a mortal wound while leading his men across the Little Bighorn to attack the Indian village. By denying Custer his grand finale on a hilltop, Miller’s painting undercut the basis of Custer’s mythic fame. Russell was enlisted in the cause. The mixed-blood scout on the left trying to mount his panicked horse derives from Russell’s oil _When Horseflesh Comes High_ (1909), while Custer, reeling from the impact of a bullet, owes his existence to the central figure in Russell’s _Bushwhacked_ (1911). That Miller copied Russell should alert readers to the fact his text is cribbed as well. His account of Custer’s death in the river, for example, had already appeared in

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a Crow woman’s autobiography twenty-five years earlier, and many of his “interviews”
drew on published accounts. Here art serves as a warning light.  

Unpeeling the layers in a more conventional treatment of Custer’s Last Stand
reveals a Russell lurking beneath a Remington, and sums up my point: repetitiveness is the
hammer that drives home the western images we carry in our heads. In the late 1930s,
artist Carl Lindeberg was often called on to illustrate brochures and posters advertising
the Karl May Museum in Dresden, Germany, with its collection of Indian artifacts and
a room devoted to the Battle of Little Bighorn. He contributed to the display a small
painting showing Gall’s warriors gathering for the final rush up Custer Hill. There is
a dramatic charm to the work as three Indians in the foreground ride hard to join the
warriors already circling Custer’s doomed command. In fact, these Indians are lifted
directly from Frederic Remington’s 1897 wash drawing The Pony War Dance, and the
Last Stand they are about to join is Russell’s 1903 watercolor Custer’s Last Fight.  

Western art has a curious status outside the West. There is a longstanding tradition of critical indifference. On 28 July 2001, at an auction in Reno, Charles Russell’s
famous 1908 painting, A Disputed Trail, showing a man-bear encounter on a narrow
mountain path, sold for a record-setting price for an American watercolor. Critics took
notice—aroused by the dollar amount, not the art. A writer in the Wall Street Journal,
Brooks Barnes, noted that with the buyer’s commission added on, a total of $2.4 million
had just been paid for a work by an “obscure 19th-century American landscape painter.” At least Barnes got one thing right. Western art by the likes of Russell and
Remington, he wrote, “has long been sneered at as ‘cowboy art’ by the art-world elite,
and many collectors would rather sit on a cattle prod than hang a rodeo scene over
the mantel.”  

Western art long ago encountered a frontier line of its own that divided East from
West and was defined by condescension, perceived and real. “There’s nothing in the
[East] for me,” Russell told a Montana reporter in 1901. “What do eastern people care

31 Frank B. Linderman, Red Mother (New York, 1932), 236–8; David Humphreys
Miller, Custer’s Fall: The Indian Side of the Story (New York, 1957), 126–30; and see Miller,
“Echoes of the Little Bighorn,” American Heritage 22 (June 1971): 32–3, which publishes the ac-
count of Sioux veteran Joseph White Cow Bull that makes him out to be the Indian who shot
Custer in the river. For the Russell paintings mentioned, see Dippie, Looking at Russell (Fort


Saddam Hussein’s fondness for the kitschy paintings of Rowena Morrill—done in the purposely
exaggerated swords-and-sandals style of scifi/fantasy art, with an exaggerated, painting-on-black-
velvet curvaciousness, bulging muscles, and heaving bosoms—has been likened to President
George W. Bush’s fondness for a landscape painting by Texas artist Tom Lea. That Lea’s work is
poker-faced in its sincerity makes it all the funnier to those in the know. See Sarah Milroy, “He
May Be a Tyrant, but He Loves His Art,” Globe and Mail, 19 April 2003.
about my pictures? Why, they wouldn't give 30 cents a dozen for them. . . . I realize and understand that. It would be useless for me to go East. I am going to stay right here and paint things as I see them in nature."34 We could chalk up Russell's remarks to provincialism, or cultural insecurity. Within a decade he would have a splashy one-man show in New York. But Thomas Moran, a far more worldly artist whose landscapes never raised the doubts that beset western genre art, told a Denver audience in 1892 that "[e]astern people don't appreciate the grand scenery of the Rockies. They are not familiar with mountain effects and it is much easier to sell a picture of a Long Island swamp than the grandest picture of Colorado."35 Westerners could just accept the situation. "Or should we," as Paul Schullery has suggested, "turn the [e]astern perspective back on itself and . . . recognize the restorative sense of scale in a remark that fishing writer Charley Waterman once offered, that a two-foot stained-glass window in New York would get more editorial comment than a year of South Dakota sunsets?"36 But turning the eastern perspective back on itself may be unnecessary if current trends continue. Historical western art is today attracting buyers in droves and arousing interest in eastern centers where, as a spokesman at Christie's said, it is now "recognized as great mainstream American art."37 Even as I speak, an exhibition of Remington's night scenes that originated at the Smithsonian's National Gallery of Art is touring the West, and a major exhibition of George Catlin's Indian portraits organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum is about to hit the road. Another frontier vanishes. Of course, not everyone will cheer. We live, as the saying goes, in conservative times. An earlier, highly critical Smithsonian retrospective on western art was supposed to tour the country, but closed in Washington without ever leaving the nation's capital. "The West as America" in 1991 kicked up a storm of controversy, proving how enduring old western myths can be—and how ideologically charged the

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34 Anaconda (Montana) Standard, 15 December 1901.


37 Eric Widing, quoted in Ann E. Berman, "Bonanza!," Traditional Home 14 (September 2003): 108. A willingness to accept western art's subject matter rather than dismissing it out of hand as boring has broadened its appeal. As a character in Jane Smiley's shrewd university parody Moo (New York, 1995), 68, muses while observing a herd of uninterested students drowsing through a lecture, "ignorance was the prime element of boredom." Princeton University Press recently has been involved in two extraordinarily handsome publications on Remington: Emily Ballew Neff, with Wynne H. Phelan, Frederic Remington: The Hogg Brothers Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (Princeton, NJ, 2000) and Nancy K. Anderson et al., Frederic Remington: The Color of Night (Washington, DC, 2003), while Yale University Press continues its distinguished tradition in publishing western history and culture with Martha A. Sandweiss's Print the Legend: Photography and the American West (New Haven, CT, 2002).
art still is. The divide was ideological, not aesthetic, and feelings ran high. Western art is routinely deplored for the values it flaunts. Remington's work, especially in the last twenty years, has been attacked as triumphalism in paint and bronze, and his contemporaries have been tarred with the same brush. Russell might offer a sympathetic vision of the old-time Plains Indian, steeped in nostalgia for the West of his youth, and even Remington in his later years might shift to a more complex, almost wistful stance on Indian subjects, but there is no refuge from modern critiques that condemn triumphalism and "imperialist nostalgia" as equally obnoxious. Even landscape artists (and photographers) are considered the tools of despoilers. Because it is an expression of ideology, western art cannot avoid the charge that it soft peddles bad values through seductive imagery. Its very visual appeal becomes evidence in the indictment.

The body of historic western art is visually appealing. An Albert Bierstadt mountain or a Moran canyon can still take the breath away. A group of Remington's wild riders racing across a boundless land or a Russell party of Blackfeet moving over the open plains still speak to freedom and possibility. Carlos Schwantes has pondered why the twentieth-century failed to make inroads into popular perceptions of the American


39 Alex Nemerov, "Doing the "Old America": The Image of the American West, 1880-1920," in The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920, ed. William H. Truettner (Washington, DC, 1991), 285-343, has been influential. Nemerov's "Projecting the Future: Film and Race in the Art of Charles Russell," American Art 8 (Winter 1994): 70-89 and Frederic Remington and Turn-of-the-Century America (New Haven, CT, 1995) provide relatively nuanced readings compared to those in Matthew Baigell, "Territory, Race, Religion: Images of Manifest Destiny," American Art 4 (Summer-Fall 1990): 2-21 and J. Gray Sweeney, "Racism, Nationalism, and Nostalgia," in Race-ing Art History: Critical Readings in Race and Art History, ed. Kymberly N. Pinder (New York, 2002), 155-68. The blanket indictment offered by Sweeney is why two artists so different in outlook as Remington and Russell have often been treated as interchangeable. Remington celebrated the winning of the West, Russell lamented it. Their work diverged after Russell found his stride in the 1890s, but also converged as Remington, having satisfied his curiosity by witnessing battle in Cuba in 1898, lost confidence in war as a glorious test of manhood. Still, at the end of their lives, their personal credos remained as different as their outlooks. Both were conservatives, Remington politically, Russell culturally, in the sense that Remington was class-conscious and coveted social cachet, while Russell clung to the past and resisted change. Seventeen days before he died in 1909, buoyed by strong reviews of his latest annual exhibition at Knoedler's, Remington crowed in his diary (entry for December 9, Diary, 1909, Frederic Remington Art Museum, Ogdenburg, NY): "The art critics have all 'come down' ... The 'Illustrator' phase has become a background." Russell, a year before he died in 1926, laboriously wrote out in pencil his take on life (More Rawhides [Great Falls, MT, 1925], 3): "I am an illustrator. There are lots better ones, but some worse. Any man that can make a living doing what he likes is lucky, and I'm that." For a recent example of challenges to the "innocence" of western landscape photography, see Martin A. Berger, "Overexposed: Whiteness and the Landscape Photography of Carleton Watkins," Oxford Art Journal 26, no. 1 (2003): 1-23.
West. He uses tourism as a measurement. But his examples of neglected twentieth-century themes—and, for that matter, of neglected nineteenth-century themes like Sand Creek and the Ludlow Massacre—only serve to remind us that tourism is about pleasure. He is looking for enlightenment in all the wrong places. Tourists vote with their feet and their wallets. National parks and a sanitized Old West offer romance. Who wants a reality check on their vacation? No wonder “the nineteenth century, not the twentieth, contains the most bankable parts of the western past.” And no wonder the bankable parts feature so prominently in western art. There must be five hundred pictures of Custer’s Last Stand, and not two dozen of the Washita.

Certain kinds of history are good at identifying breach of promise, but are of no help in explaining the promise that was breached. They are good on divorce, but not on marriage. We may have tired of the dreams of white pioneers who hoped for better lives in a western promised land. But dreamers come in all colors and from all cultures. It was Langston Hughes who late in the Great Depression wrote, “Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed”:

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.
(America never was America to me.)

.....
O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where every man is free.
The land that’s mine—the poor man’s, Indian’s, Negro’s, ME—
Who made America,
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again.41

Black Elk—or was it John Neihardt translating Black Elk?—saw the failure of his “mighty vision” in the shattering of “the sacred hoop of my people,” but on a brassy hot day in South Dakota in 1931 called down a little rain from what had been a cloudless sky in a time of drought, and wept with joy because the dream lived on.42 And lives


42 John G. Neihardt, Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Ogalala Sioux (New York, 1932), 2, 43. Perhaps the most quoted lines in the book come after Black Elk’s
on still, in Mexican dreamers with their compasses set north, and Asian dreamers with their compasses set east, and even Canadian dreamers with their compasses set south. In 2001, more than thirty thousand Canadians moved to the United States, and about six thousand Americans out of a population ten times larger, moved to Canada. Wallace Stegner, who had the experience as an American of growing up in Saskatchewan literally on the border—"Our plowshares bit into Montana sod every time we made the turn at the south end of the field"—remembered that "[t]he 49th parallel ran directly through my childhood, dividing me in two."

In winter . . . we were almost totally Canadian. The textbooks we used in school were published in Toronto and made by Canadians or Englishmen; the geography we studied was focused on the Empire and the Dominion. . . . The songs we sang were . . . "The Maple Leaf Forever" and "God Save the King"; the flag we saluted was the Union Jack. . . .

Stegner concluded his musings with the observation that, "[u]ndistinguishable and ignored as it was, artificially as it split a country that was topographically and climatically one, the international boundary marked a divide in our affiliations, expectations, loyalties." Perhaps it was his Canadian childhood that made Stegner so deeply suspicious of Wild West mythology. Even though as a boy he lived for awhile in Great Falls, Montana, and cut Charlie Russell's lawn, he had no patience with Russell's subject matter—the very heart of western art and that art's evocation of western myth. "The narrative of Wounded Knee (p. 276): "A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream."

The author's postscript provides the book's upbeat ending.

43 See Jesus Martinez-Saldana, "La Frontera del Norte," in Over the Edge: Remapping the American West, ed. Valerie J. Matsumoto and Blake Allmendinger (Berkeley, 1999), 376; the Cambodian story quilt, 1980s, reproduced in Dippie, West-Fever, 8–9; and Peoples of Color in the American West, ed. Sucheng Chan, Douglas Henry Daniels, Mario T. Garcia, and Terry P. Wilson (Lexington, MA, 1994), in which the emphasis on the dystopian reality awaiting immigrants to America implies utopian expectations. See A. Roger Ekirch, "Sometimes an Art, Never a Science, Always a Craft: A Conversation with Bernard Bailyn," William and Mary Quarterly, 3d Series, 51 (October 1994): 650, for Bailyn's observation: "Do I agree that there have been special, in some ways benevolent, conditions here? Yes, despite all the miseries. Some of our peculiarities have been wonderfully good, some bad. Obviously, we have never been an ideal society, and obviously we have never been immune to the corruptions of power and other ills and brutalities, and we have no mission to save mankind, though we have been an asylum for vast numbers of fearful, oppressed, and ambitious people. After all, fifty million people came here voluntarily from other countries because they thought things would be better than they were where they came from."

44 "California Dreamin' becomes reality for growing flocks of snowbirds," Times Colonist (Victoria, BC), 7 December 2002.

45 Wallace Stegner, Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier (New York, 1962), 82, 81–2, 84.

46 Wallace Stegner, Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West (New York, 1992), xv–xxiii, 3–4, 14, 57–8, 71–2, 102, 106–10, 137; and see Wallace Stegner and Richard W. Etulain, Stegner: Conversations on Western History and
West does not need to explore its myths much further," Stegner stated, "it has already relied on them too long."\(^{47}\) Dare I say it? Stegner was wrong. He was wise about the West. But when it came to myth—the geography of hope—he was as smitten as the rest. He derived two titles from a hard times song about a dreamland where the bluebird sings by the lemonade spring in the Big Rock Candy Mountains. The pleasure he gives resides in paradox. He knew the futility of dreams without ever denying their power. He knew that a border separated two different cultures on the northern plains, and he knew that it was permeable.

A fellow Albertan back in 1983 noted that an American and a Canadian could "tune in the same American western" on their TVs, "but the American is watching something domestic, in some sense his own, while the Canadian is watching something he knows to be exotic. The pictures are the same but the experience is quite different."\(^{48}\) Was he right? Certainly Lewis G. Thomas, chair of the history department at the University of Alberta when I was an undergraduate in the early sixties, thought so. Thomas's work on the ranching community in southern Alberta where he was raised proved influential in entrenching the idea of a Canadian "mild West"—law-abiding, Victorian, and oh so proper. Thomas was especially disturbed by the U. S. penchant for myth, which glorified instead the wild and woolly. His own belief in a genteel English tradition on the Canadian range carried within it the seeds of a countervailing mythology as self-flattering for Canadians as Turner's belief that the frontier nurtured a distinctive and democratic national character was for Americans. "There is no more persistent myth in Canada than the myth that Canada is or has been a society free of crime and violence," a contrarian Canadian historian remarked.\(^{49}\) Nevertheless, Thomas, who contributed to this very myth, deplored myth's falsification of history. "Public taste seems to demand glamorization," he observed in a 1964 interview. "If Davy Crockett is the price of glamor, then I can do without it. . . . I don't see any point in this approach to history. I think it's a blessing we don't have it in Canada."\(^{50}\)

\(^{47}\) Wallace Stegner, quoted in Walter Hildebrandt and Brian Hubner, The Cypress Hills: The Land and Its People (Saskatoon, SK, 1994), epigraph on frontal material that is not paginated.

\(^{48}\) Dick Harrison, "Fictions of the American and Canadian Wests," Prairie Forum 8 (Spring 1983): 91. I am indebted to Wolfgang Klooss for this reference.

\(^{49}\) T. Thorner, "The Not-So-Peaceable Kingdom: Crime and Criminal Justice in Frontier Calgary," in Frontier Calgary: Town, City, and Region 1875–1914, ed. Anthony W. Rasporich and Henry C. Klassen (Calgary, AB, 1975), 113. This myth is enshrined in Michael Moore's award-winning documentary Bowling for Columbine (2002), which praises Canadians for their civility at the expense of those gun-crazy Americans.

\(^{50}\) "Canada Better off without Crocketts," Edmonton Journal (Alberta), 6 May 1964. "Myth-makers" were Thomas's bane. See Lewis G. Thomas, "The Rancher and the City:
The truth is something else. Artists on either side of the 49th-parallel have contributed to a western imagery that knows no borders. Victoria, where I live, nurtured Emily Carr, Canada's Georgia O'Keeffe. Carr, like O'Keeffe, is now a book-a-year-industry. Carr's haunting vision of rainforest and totem conforms to Thomas's genteel vision of Western Canada, I suppose, lacking the skulls that salt O'Keeffe's Southwest, though rich in decapitated trees and Native cultures carved in wood that for Carr, like Catlin before her, were as impermanent as the poles they created, which would in time rejoin the earth. Hers was no wild West—Vancouver Island, she wrote, was "that one step more [w]estern than the West." But the Wild West has a home in Canada, too,

Calgary and the Cattlemen, 1883–1914," in Ranchers' Legacy: Alberta Essays by Lewis G. Thomas, ed. Patrick A. Dunae (Edmonton, AB, 1986), 45. Jeffrey Brison, "The Rockefeller Foundation and Cultural Policy on the North Western Frontier," Journal of Canadian Art History/Annales d'histoire de l'art Canadien 23, nos. 1 & 2 (2002): 80: "Canadians, not being exhibitionists, have not produced a large crop of . . . characters; their frontiers have carried relatively subdued colours . . . and the 'sterling fellow' has been more characteristic of them than the 'cut-up'. . . . How could it be otherwise when the sedate East was streaming out west in a vast migration that carried all its values along with it?" Brison's essay concentrates on American folklorist Robert Card, who taught at the Banff School of Fine Arts and headed the Alberta Folklore and Local History Project at the University of Alberta in the years 1942–1945.

51 Growing Pains: The Autobiography of Emily Carr (Toronto, 1946), 271. Carr's cryptic reference to a meeting with O'Keeffe in New York in 1930 (p. 338 in The Autobiography) has piqued curiosity: Carr thought "some of her things" beautiful, but found O'Keeffe unhappy "when she speaks of her work." For the Carr-O'Keeffe connection, see Megan Bice and Sharyn Udall, The Informing Spirit: Art of the American Southwest and West Coast Canada, 1925–1945 (Kleinburg, ON, 1994); and Sharyn Rohlfisn Udall, Carr, O'Keeffe, Kahlo: Places of Their Own (New Haven, CT, 2000). From a nationalistic perspective, Carr is more commonly linked to her Canadian contemporaries, the Group of Seven. For context, see, The Group of Seven in Western Canada, ed. Catharine M. Mastin (Toronto, ON, 2002). For a regional perspective, see Robert Thacker, "Being on the Northwest Coast: Emily Carr, Cascadian," Pacific Northwest Quarterly 90 (Fall 1999): 182–90 and Jay Stewart and Peter Macnair, To the Totem Forests: Emily Carr and Contemporaries Interpret Coastal Villages (Victoria, BC, 1999), which broaches the contested issue of Carr, Native cultures, and cultural appropriation. See, for two positions on the debate, Marcia Crosby, "Construction of the Imaginary Indian," in Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art, ed. Stan Douglas (Vancouver, BC, 1991), 267–91; and Douglas Cole, "The Invented Indian/The Imagined Emily," BC Studies nos. 125 & 126 (Spring/Summer 2000): 147–62. More is in the works on this topic; meanwhile, a primary document, Carr's 1913 "Lecture on Totems," was published for the first time in Opposite Contraries: The Unknown Journals of Emily Carr and Other Writings, ed. Susan Crean (Vancouver, BC, 2003), 177–203. Carr believed in a "passing people" and their vanishing culture: "And so I have gone about my work making this collection of Indian totems and I am not through yet. What I have done I have done alone and single-handed. I have been backed by neither companies nor individuals. I have borne my own expenses and done my own work. . . . I am a Canadian born and bred. I glory in our wonderful West and I [would] like to leave behind me some of the relics of its first primitive greatness. These things should be to us Canadians what the ancient Britons' relics are to the English. Only a few more years and they will be gone forever into silent nothingness. . . ." (pp. 177, 202–3) Here, for comparison, is George Catlin, A Descriptive Catalogue of Catlin's Indian Gallery Portraits, Landscapes, Costumes, &c. and Representations of the Manners and Customs of the North American Indians (London, 1840), on his mission to form an Indian
if only to appeal to prospective American tourists. “Come to where the West is still wild,” an Air Canada advertisement urged readers of the *New York Times* in 1971:

> There is a place in this world that is still untouched.  
> A place where the air is clean and cool and smells sweet.  
> A silent wilderness where the only sound you hear is your own sigh.  
> That place is in western Canada. And Air Canada can take you there.  
> It’s part of our Canadian Rockies tour.  
> You’ll begin in Calgary, where every year the wild and woolly Calgary Stampede takes place.\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{52} Advertisement for Air Canada in the *New York Times*, 23 May 1971.
The accompanying illustration showed a cartoon cowboy racing towards the viewer, waving his hat in welcome. Experience the Wild—and woolly—West firsthand. It awaits you in Canada, and in dreams everywhere.

The cover art for this year's Western History Association's program reproduces a detail from Charles Russell's *In Without Knocking*. It is a classic western image that needs to be updated. Perhaps Emily Carr and Georgia O'Keeffe should be riding with those cowboys. But as it stands, it is a vivid take on the geography of hope. A recent poll declared it the best painting of cowboys ever done.53 They are not at work, note. They are not tending cows. But they are boys, and the sap is running. At hand is the solution to western aridity, one drink at a time. The quest is over, Elysium attained. Leave the hangovers for tomorrow. Now is the moment to celebrate. [See Figure 4.]