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The Myth and Allure of the West

Cowboy Artists of America Preview

Controversial Art: How Far Is Too Far?

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Feature

The Myth &

COURTESY OF HOLLYWOOD COWBOY

Hollywood posters, such as this Roy Roger's movie, helped create romantic notions of the West.

Although most cowboys and their beloved range are long gone, cowboy culture is alive and kickin'. What is it about the story of the American West that possesses such enduring power? Why do western images and icons have the continued capacity to appeal?

Some say it's the sheer beauty of the landscape. On first seeing New Mexico in 1917, Georgia O'Keeffe remarked, "I loved it immediately. From then on, I was always on my way back."

O'Keeffe followed in the footsteps of a long legacy of artists who ventured west and fell in love with the region's splendor and romance. Artists such as Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Moran, Frederic Remington and Charles Russell captured the grand landscape in varied media, originating what would become a lengthy campaign by artists influencing our perceptions of the West, which continues uninterrupted today.

While the beauty of the unspoiled western landscape had the ability to captivate, its persuasive power came from its promise of opportunity. The frontier was more than a place; it was a means to realize a dream—to claim territory and start anew.

Americans headed west for nothing less than a second chance. This opportunity for a new start makes the country's settlement story a suitable allegory for American's aspirations, in any era. While we can no longer claim a homestead, America's landscape of democracy and freedom still whispers the promise of reinvention. Indeed, various aspects of the settlement story appeal and endure because they shape our vision of our country and of ourselves. "Who am I?" we may ask, and "Who do I wish to become?"

More than any other figure of the West, the cowboy has become a repository of our collective perceptions and dreams. In reality, the cowboy was a low-paid, sometimes lawless laborer, but by endowing him with rugged individualism, courage and honor: he tamed the wilderness, became the good guy and always

Allure of the West

saved the day. The cowboy grew larger than life and the facts of his true existence blurred.

The Myth

Varied media encouraged our idealized figures and their stories. Long before the advent of television, America's favorite mode of escapism was pulp-fiction magazines, and the western genre was the most popular. Printed on inexpensive, rough-wood pulp, these adventure stories captured the attention of newsstand buyers with colorful and campy illustrations of cowboys, often defeating the bad guy or rescuing damsels in distress.

Indeed, the myth that has come to define the West has enjoyed a long-standing public relations campaign including railroad promoters, Wild West shows, western romance and adventure paperback novels, radio serials, shoot-'em-up Hollywood westerns, television series, country-western crooners and glamorous rodeo stars.

Fine artists also played a significant role in defining and developing the myth of the West, through vivid portraits, landscapes and narrative subject matter. George Catlin invited a gaze upon an unknown culture by traveling the West in the 1830s to paint portraits of 50 American Indian tribes for historical documentation. By 1859, majestic landscape paintings by Albert Bierstadt offered romantic visions of the mysterious expanse. And while William Henry Jackson documented the West with photography beginning in the 1870s, fine artists continued creating and therefore, influencing constructs of Western history and its heroes. Approximately 175 years later, with the "wild" in the Wild West long gone, many artists continue to portray "cowboys and Indians" and wide-open plains.

The Force of Nature Humbles All Men by Howard Terpning (oil painting 54-1/2"x74-1/2"). This is the cowboy artist painting that sold for $800,000 at this year's Autry National Center's Masters of the American West Sale in Los Angeles.

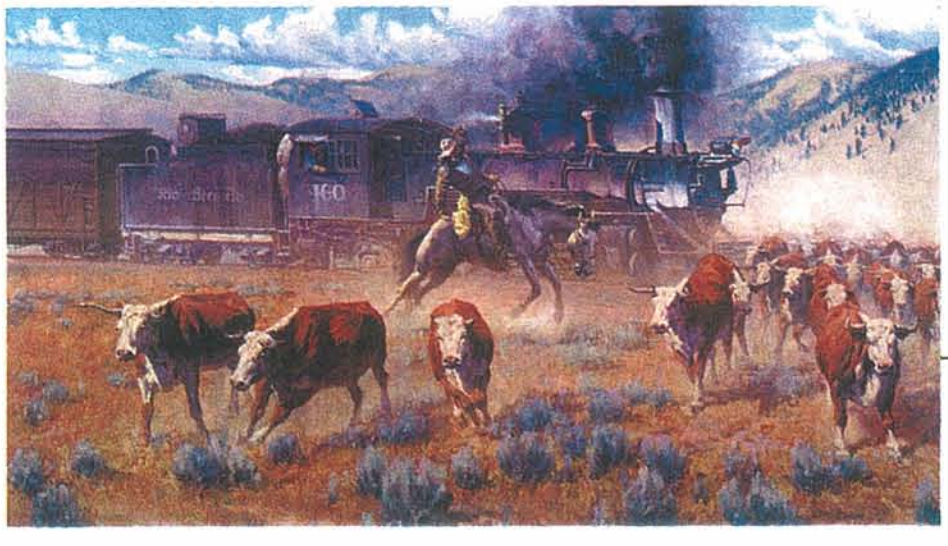
The Debate

While "seldom is heard a discouraging word" about artists such as Remington and Russell (who documented the frontier and its cast of characters firsthand), critics of later artists (not alive during the settlement of the frontier) abound. Some critics claim that art should have relevance to the present time for the purposes of education and revelation. Scottsdale contemporary artist and art dealer Agenese Udinotti, says, "Today's western artists are painting a dream to supply the demand of tourists seeking a romantic idea. Of course, painters can paint whatever they want to paint, but it's all a big 'b.s.'"

Proponents of cowboy art often come back to the ongoing debate of abstract versus representational art. For example, Stuart Johnson, owner of Tucson, Ariz.'s Settler's West Galleries, says, "Most abstract painters couldn't paint a good representational, figurative work, but a realist can sure paint a black canvas with a white dot in the middle."

However, critics assert that well-honed technique (even if masterful), used solely to depict scenes of beauty, romance and adventure in the American West omits critical facts. Los Angeles-based Catherine Leonhard, Christie's American Painting specialist, seems outraged when she says, "What about painting the Native Americans who were starved and tortured or the near annihilation of the Buffalo?"

Glen Lineberry, co-founder of



Whistle Sky by Gary Carter, (oil painting 42" x 24"). Carter is a member of Cowboy Artists of America who has been adopted by the Crow Tribe and the Real Bird Family in Montana.

COURTESY OF BILTMORE GALLERIES

The Bronco Buster, bronze by Frederic Remington, one of the best known of Remington's sculptures.

COURTESY OF BILTMORE GALLERIES

Capturing the Grizzly by C. M. Russell (oil painting 18" x 30"). Russell and Remington were the two artists that popularized Western art.

Scottsdale and Phoenix, Ariz. Bentley Gallery and Bentley Projects (specializing in contemporary art) says, "Today's western artists are under no obligation to be accurate and it's simply unfair to denigrate their work because it advances a myth. It's a myth worth advancing. In America, if you work hard, there are no obstacles in reaching your goal. Just because we enjoy a certain myth does not mean we ignore the terrible things that happened."

Joni Kinsey, an associate professor of art history at University of Iowa, who has written widely about mythology in Western art, suggests that increasing numbers of people are seeking the truth about Western history, "seeing conflict and conquest, rather than triumph. I try not to focus on the art being good or bad, but to encourage people to ask, 'What else is there?'

"The history of the portrayal of the Native American offers insight," continues Kinsey. "At first, pictorially, artists portrayed Native Americans as noble savages, untamed by modern culture. However, as America moved into their territory, we demonized them to justify our attacks. While we continued to depict Native Americans as exotic, our images of them became more savage. Finally, around 1900, when our conquest concluded and Native Americans were no longer a threat to White expansion, there is a shift to a nostalgic interpretation.

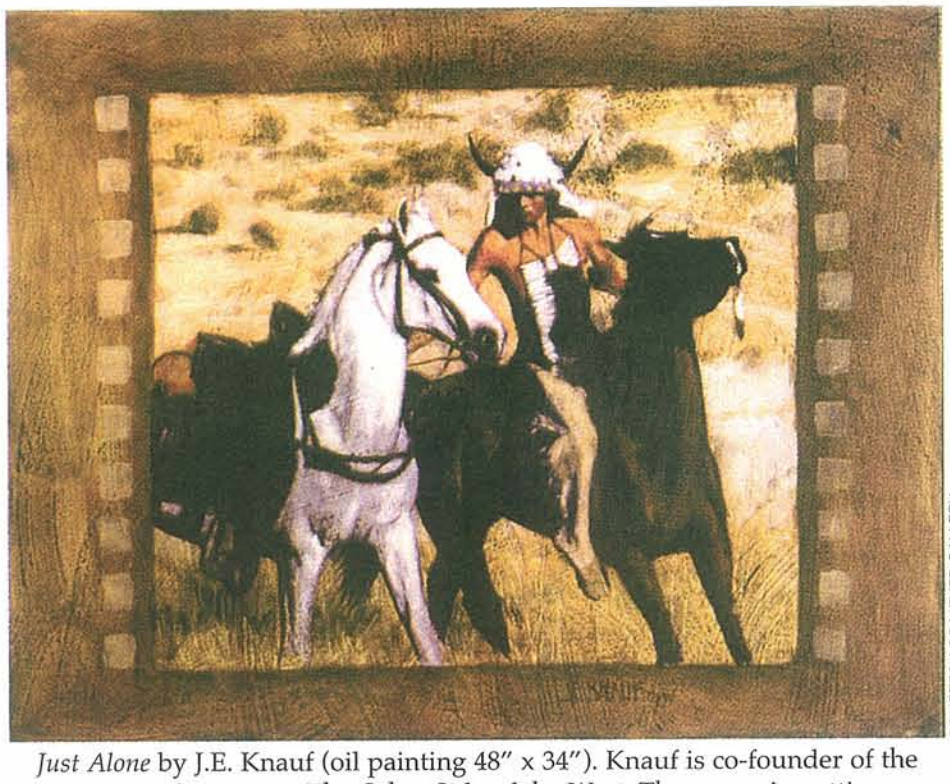
"We see it in official ways," says Kinsey, "including the appearance of a Native American on the flip side of the Buffalo nickel and on the Indian penny. In general, sculptures of Native Americans became not only nostalgic, but heroic."

Yet, seeking the truth behind Western images is difficult, if not impossible. With history written by the victors, many of the true Native American tales are lost. "The Native American culture was utterly changed and many of their stories irretrievable," says Kinsey.

In an attempt to uncover the cultural stereotypes of Native Americans in Western Art, as well as explore the role of fine art as propaganda for Western expansion, William Truettner curated a 1991 exhibition at Washington's National Museum of American Art entitled, *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820 - 1920*. Consisting of more than 150 artworks, including pieces by George Caleb Bingham, George Catlin, Frederic Remington and Charles Russell, with wall text encouraging viewers to reinterpret the images in light of historians' more accurate understanding of the West, the show outraged some American citizens, as well as politicians. In fact, Senator Ted Stevens threatened to cut federal funding to the museum. Truetter says, "While I admittedly overargued some of my points; I believe that much of the controversy stemmed from disturbing the founding myth of our country." Indeed, our feel good heritage story serves as a comfort myth that some do not want analyzed or deconstructed.

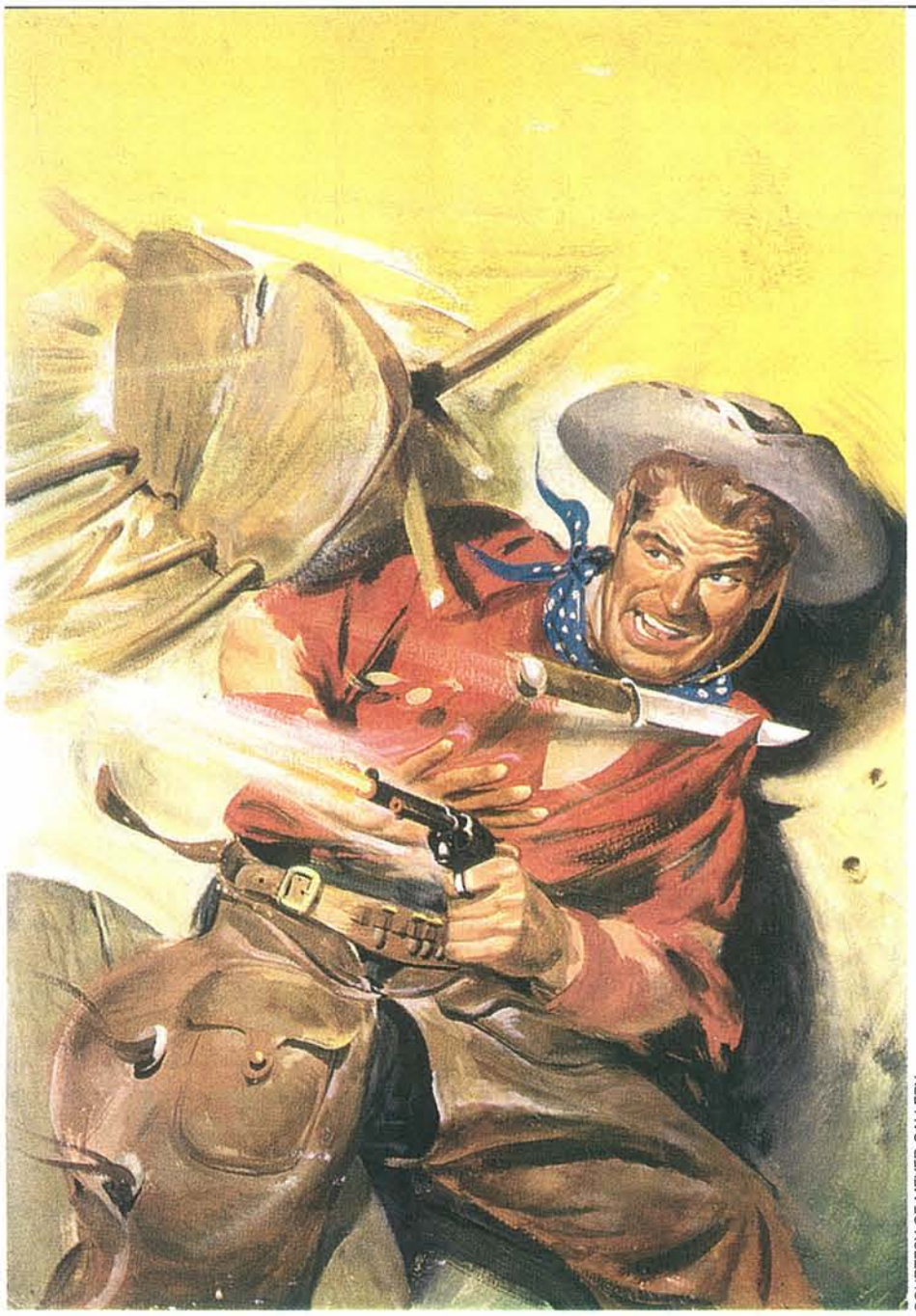
The Market

The support of idealized images of the West is also evident in the bustling Western Art market. Western Art collectors continue to be dazzled by quality works by both living and deceased artists. As a result, demand



COURTESY OF MEYER GALLERY

Just Alone by J.E. Knauf (oil painting 48" x 34"). Knauf is co-founder of the ten-member group, The Other Side of the West. The group is putting a different light on Western art.



COURTESY OF MEYER GALLERY

This magazine cover by Rafael DeSoto called *Out Numbered but Not Out Gunned* exemplifies how the myth of western lawlessness struck a chord with pop culture.

and price continue to escalate. This year's Coeur d'Alene Auction in Reno, Nev. (specializing in wildlife, sporting art and art of the American West), is a good indicator, hitting a new record of over $18 million, with 99.3% of works sold. Indeed, Thomas Moran's *Mists in the Yellowstone*, estimate $2 million to $3 million, fetched a whopping $4,928,000—almost double its estimate.

Stuart Johnson, one of three founders of the auction, points to a strong market for living western artists, as well. The price for a painting by Tucson, Ariz.'s Howard Terpning (who is represented by Johnson and commands the highest price of any living western artist), hit a new record of $800,000 for *The Force of Nature Humbles All Men*, at this year's Autry National Center's *Masters of the American West* Sale in Los Angeles.

"Prices fall off a cliff to another level for living artists' work," says Maryvonne Leshe, a partner in the prominent Trailside Galleries in Jackson, Wyo. and Scottsdale, Ariz., specializing in Western Art. "Many of the good CAA [Cowboy Artists of America] sell for about $100,000 to $200,000," says Leshe. To explain the disparity in price, she says, "Terpning does exhaustively researched, technically skilled paintings with quite complex compositions—usually portraying a strong narrative. As a result, he produces only a few paintings each year."

Jinger Richardson, a partner in the well-known Legacy Gallery in Jackson Hole, Wyo. and Scottsdale, Ariz., also specializing in Western Art, confirms the importance of accurate representation in Western artists' work. "Many of our gallery artists collect authentic Western memorabilia to accurately reproduce in their paintings."

Steve Rose of Scottsdale's Biltmore Galleries, who sells only the work of deceased artists, asserts, "Legitimacy and authenticity can only be attributed to artists like Remington and Russell, who were alive when it all happened. They actually documented the West."

However, gauging the long-standing success of the CAA, with approximately 25 contemporary artists creating images of the Old West, collectors don't seem to give a hoot if artists are reinventing the story of the West or seeing it with their own eyes. The *CAA Sale and Exhibition*, which is the country's premier Western Art event, launches its 39th show and 31st year at the Phoenix Art Museum on October 22. Museum Director James Ballinger says the group's longstanding success is a testament to the work's appeal. "It's the oldest association of its type with no historical precedent in any genre, lasting way beyond any group of artists."

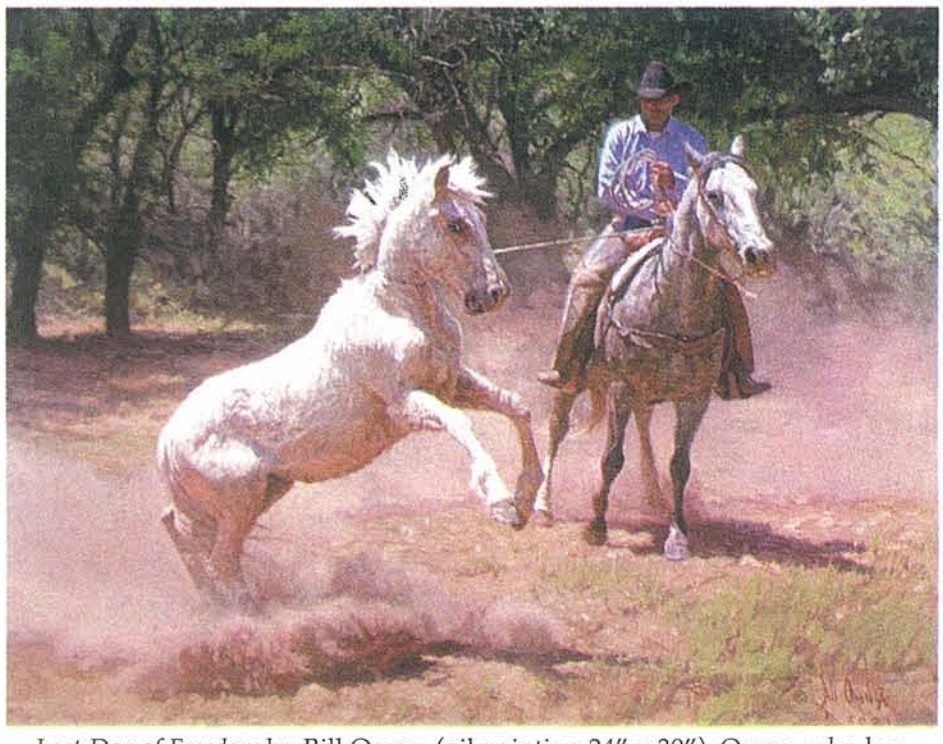
While Ballinger indicates several factors attributing to CAA's continued success, he points primarily to demographics: "The population center is moving west, aided in part by advancements in technology-enabling relocation from urban centers. As a result, a new generation of Western Art lovers, who like realist and narrative art, has emerged." Howard Terpning, a CAA member for 25 years, also cites varied motivations for today's collectors: "Some collect because they love art-others for investment or to buy 'a name.'"

Additional artists are creating images of the West with a more contemporary technique. A group calling themselves, The Other Side of the West, is "tweaking and sometimes shattering traditional concepts in Western Art," says J.E. Knauf, an Arizona painter and co-founder. The ten-member group includes prominent and well-collected artists such as Donna Howell-Sickles (of Texas), Robert Daughters and JD Challenger (both of Arizona). "Our work is not a parody of western imagery," explains Knauf, "but a sincere embrace of its iconography."

The stories and images of the American West, whether mythical or real, continue to weave their potent spell. Indeed, their influence knows no bounds. Western movies, television, books and art enjoyed abroad produce a thriving European, Canadian and Japanese tourist market for the American West and American art dealers and auction houses sell "cowboy and Indian" paintings and sculptures to foreign collectors.

The frontier, no longer a geographic locale, is a concept kept very much alive by image-makers and our fertile imagination. "The West is dead," penned Charles Russell. "You may lose a sweetheart, but you won't forget her."

-Amy Abrams



Last Day of Freedom by Bill Owen, (oil painting 24" x 30"). Owen, who has been a Cowboy Artist since 1973, records his childhood and adult experiences in ranching. Owen's father was cowboy and his mother an artist.