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David's *Sabine Women In The Wild West*

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When one considers the body of mid-nineteenth-century paintings of the American West, one is struck by the place of women, especially white women, in them. In the large majority of cases, from George Catlin and Seth Eastman to Frederic Remington and Charles Russell, women are conspicuous by their absence. We know that many women did go west with their husbands, striving to maintain some semblance of the civilization they knew in the rough and primitive conditions of army posts and frontier settlements. But they were an anomaly in such environments; in the popular nineteenth-century view, women, at least "good" women, were perceived as fragile creatures, gentle and delicate, who would wither and die under the harsh conditions of frontier life. Perhaps this attitude explains a tendency on the part of contemporary painters to picture them in rather more academic terms than they did the men. References to Christian iconography, classical sculpture, and, above all, prints and engravings after European masterpieces seem more evident in the few paintings involving women than in those describing the adventures of their husbands. This difference may be due to the fact that it was myth rather than reality that dominated the pictorial presence of women—a myth underscored by the notion that, while men engaged in such manly sports as hunting and exploring and clearing the wilderness, it was the women who personified the advance of civilization into it. Furthermore, the heroic effort of settling into an alien environment and overcoming the emotional and physical hardships inherent in such a transplantation was not lost on the artists of the American West. Thus, in varying degrees, it is in these two roles—as transmitter of culture and heroine of westward expansion—that we must consider the image of the white woman in the frontier West.

Engravings after Jacques-Louis David's Sabine Women of 1799 (Fig. 1), illustrating a classic story of reconciliation brought about by heroic women who had established roots in an alien land, served as an important artistic source for images of the pioneer women. Generally
interacted as an allegorical plea for an end to the internecine bloodshed of the French Revolution, David’s picture is an unusual one in the context of previous representations of the ancient legend, for rather than showing the actual abduction of the Sabine women and the beginning of the Roman-Sabine war, David chose instead to illustrate its peaceful conclusion. Indeed, the work reflected a growing revulsion for the excesses of the Reign of Terror and a desire to end the violent conflict that had overthrown the ancien régime. It is also a clear demonstration of what Robert Rosenblum has called the exemplum virtutis, that is, a work of art, usually characterized by a veneration of feminine heroism, that was intended to teach a lesson in virtue. From the late eighteenth century on, this type of painting began to dominate iconographical choice, with particular preference being given to events from ancient Greek and Roman history.

Two aspects of the Sabine women are involved in the translation of that theme to the American West. The first is a formal one in which echoes of David’s painting, transmitted through prints and engravings of it, are to be found in the composition of an American painting. The second is a less tangible connection in which the idea, rather than the form, of David’s subject is to be found in the American example. This article addresses both these aspects of the Sabine women theme in the art of the Wild West.

Although it is difficult to document the prevalence of engravings after David’s Sabine Women in the United States in the early to mid-nineteenth century, we do know that the medium itself was an important one in the
development of the arts of the young republic. On the one hand it represented a technical accomplishment, an exacting craft in which many American painters were trained. On the other it was the means by which young artists who had not had the opportunity to study abroad became familiar with European paintings. The influence of engraved reproductions after old and modern masters cannot be overestimated in understanding the formation of the aesthetic perceptions of our native artists and of their visual memory. Moreover, at least one specific reference to David's Sabine Women appears in a list of engravings ordered by a Captain Killian for the drawing classes at the United States Military Academy in 1827. It is likely that the newly founded art academies in New York and Philadelphia also found the Sabine Women an appropriate lesson in both drawing and proper sentiment for the students, who thus absorbed its message as well as its form just as they were absorbing classical sculpture from the plaster casts they were expected to copy.

The story of the Sabine women, told by both Livy and Plutarch, offers some relevant parallels to the story of the pioneer women in the American West. Like their American counterparts, the Sabine women had acquired a legendary aura as heroines of peace and civilization, for after having been transported—or in their case abducted—from their own land to ancient Rome, they had nevertheless settled down in the new land and begun to raise their families there. When, some years later, their Sabine menfolk came to “rescue” or else avenge them, the leader of the Sabine women, Hersilia, now wife of the Roman leader, Romulus, thrust herself between her husband and her Sabine brother, Tatius. Time had reconciled the women to their new home and made it acceptable to them. Herein lies the tie with nineteenth-century paintings of the frontier West. Like David’s heroines, the pioneer woman was expected to accept her removal to a new land, to raise her children there, and to act as an agent of civilization and peace. Her mere presence on the frontier was expected to tame the violent proclivities of the men through her opposition to force and bloodshed and her pleading for peace. Furthermore, the love she evoked was thought of as a catalyst in blending disparate political and social elements into an established community. As James Fenimore Cooper put it in The Prairie (1827), his novel of westward migration, “woman was made to perform her accustomed and grateful office. The barriers of prejudice and religion were broken through by the irresistible power of the master passion; and family unions, ere long, began to cement the political ties which had made a forced conjunction between people so opposite in their habits, their educations and their opinions.”

Thus, in contemporary literature as in art, the woman was described as a civilizing influence who, with the help of the children that she brought into the world, symbolized the transition from the wild, crude man’s world to a domestic and settled one, receptive to education, the arts, and an ordered society. It was thus that she sank down roots and built the stable society that reclaimed the exiled males.

John Mix Stanley’s Osage Scalp Dance of 1845 (Fig. 2) is a paradigm of these ideas presented in a dramatic picture of a group of Osage warriors surrounding a captive white woman and her small child. To twentieth-century taste, it seems self-conscious and melodramatic. But, like David’s painting, Stanley’s is notably a studio piece, posed and theatrical, in the traditional grand manner of history painting of the eighteenth century. It reflected, however, an aesthetic dilemma that was typical of its own period. That dilemma has been described as a conflict between the priorities of the past and the demands of the present, between an artist’s desire to describe contemporary events and his commitment to the classical ethos and the idealized sentiment of the grand tradition. Stanley’s painting typically resolves that conflict by an almost deliberate theatricalization of the western theme as a synthesis of allegory and reality, of idealization and naturalism, and of the fresh and immediate vision of the artist with the demands of academic painting.
In his written description of the scene, Stanley made a point of emphasizing its playacting qualities. He was familiar with the Osage Indians and their tribal rituals, for he had traveled extensively among them and, in 1842, had even established a temporary painting studio near Fort Gibson in the Oklahoma Territory. In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition of his Indian pictures at the Smithsonian Institution in 1852, he noted that the "wild Indians do not scalp captive white women and children but merely hold them until they are ransomed." He then went on to describe the Osage Scalp Dance as a staged affair in which "the chief and warriors, after having painted themselves... to the most hideous appearance, encircle their captives." Then, "at a tap on their drums, they commence throwing themselves into the attitudes such as each one's imagination suggests as the most savage, accompanied by yells, for the purpose of striking terror into the hearts of the captives." But the Osage chief is very much a noble savage: Stanley's account continues, "a warrior [is] in the act of striking the woman with his club, his chief springs forward and arrests the blow with his spear."7

There was still another idea in the air at the time that disposed the painters of the American scene to think of westward expansion in terms of epic European paintings, especially those of David. This was the concept of Manifest Destiny, set forth by an editor of the Illinois Gazette in 1824 as a destiny which "Greece and Rome, in the days of their pride, might have envied, ... the destiny of regenerating by our example a fallen world and restoring to man his lost long rights."8 It was not long before this concept was invoked as moral justification for the expansion westward and for the right of the white race to take over the lands of the benighted savages of the West.
Few, of course, reached the rhetorical heights of William Gilpin, soldier, explorer, territorial governor of Colorado, and ardent advocate of Manifest Destiny, whose presentation to Congress in 1846 on the subject merely reflected a national view. "The untransacted destiny of the American field," he declared, "is to subdue this continent, to rush over its vast field to the Pacific Ocean . . . to establish a new order in human affairs, to set free the enslaved . . . to teach old nations a new civilization . . . to emblazon history with the conquest of peace, to unite the world in one social family, and to shed a new and resplendent glory upon mankind."9 There is no doubt that in achieving these exalted ends the white woman was the instrument of social unification, who would prove, through her tender and gentle nature, the moral superiority of white society. Furthermore, by retaining her innocence even in a corrupt male society, she could extend the blessings of Christianity, white civilization, and peace to a similarly uncorrupted noble savage. In this half-mythic character, as arbiter of peace and guardian of morals, she echoed the role of the Sabine women.

Stanley's picture describes a preliminary aspect, as it were, of the white woman's civilizing influence. Though the frontier is still fraught with danger for the "weaker sex," her mere presence appeals to the protective instincts of at least some of the males and thus provides the impetus for civilized life. The painting even conveys a covert religious message, as is often the case in portrayals of the white woman in the western wilderness, for the sacred purity of a Raphael madonna is suggested in the captive's pose and in the half-naked infant who clings to her. Her white dress, unsullied even after her capture on a wild frontier, her sheltering gesture over the child, and even her obvious helplessness project a nineteenth-century image of innocence and female virtue. Nevertheless, it might be noted that the bare-bottomed infant, who has somehow lost his knickers on the prairie, reflects a typical nineteenth-century taste for a kind of chaste eroticism that the female, in this case, can hardly display. Though this female captive does not intercede on her own behalf, as Hersilia, the leader of the Sabine women does, her very helplessness does the trick. Just in the nick of time, and even repeating the gesture and pose of Hersilia, the Osage chief behind the captive wards off with his spear the threatened blow of his companion's tomahawk. It should be noted, however, that this rescuing Indian, though discreetly tattooed, wears none of the body paint or animal skins decorating his more ferocious-looking companions. Beneath his bear-claw necklace, he wears instead a silver presidential medallion hanging like a protective icon above the white woman. Such medallions, bearing the likenesses of former presidents, were given as gifts by the United States government to tribal chieftains whose attitudes and actions it wished to reward. This trinket alone would, therefore, testify to the civilizing influence of white culture, which had already touched the Osage chief and, indirectly, rescued his white captives.

No such influence is evident, however, among the savages who attack a white woman in a painting that may well have provided inspiration for the Stanley picture. John Vanderlyn's The Death of Jane McCrae (Fig. 3) of 1804 recounts an event that took place during the Revolutionary War. The story is simple, brief, and to the point. Jane McCrae one day left the safety of the stockade of Fort Edwards in western New York State to meet her lover, a young soldier in the army of General Burgoyne. Alas, poor Jane! With her lover almost in sight, she was waylaid by two fierce Indians, who scalped her. This event became a cause célèbre, told and retold in many primitive copies of Vanderlyn's painting and in popular prints and ballads. Despite its later bowdlerization, however, The Death of Jane McCrae still had good academic sources in European art. It was painted in Paris only five years after David's Sabine Women, and David's influence is apparent in the struggling figures of Jane McCrae and her captors. Though her stage was the wilderness of upper New York State rather than ancient Rome, and though, unlike the Sabine
women (or Stanley's heroine), Jane McCrae failed to soothe the violent proclivities of the male antagonists, her portrayal, like that of the Sabine women, suggested epic events described in classical terms. Not only are the poses of the Indians based on classical statuary, but even their garments, despite their brevity, more nearly suggest Roman costume than the ordinary attire of Mohawk warriors. Jane herself, kneeling helplessly at their feet, is a dying Niobid transplanted from ancient Greece to the western New York woodlands.

An amalgam of classical sources and religious imagery is to be found in another epic painting of westward expansion that hints at the message—though it does not repeat the form—of the Sabine women. This is George Caleb Bingham's *Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers through the Cumberland Gap* (Fig. 4). The picture, painted in 1851, strongly suggests the traditional Christian symbolism of the flight into Egypt, for the pioneer group is dominated by a chastely draped Madonna-like
woman on a white horse, forming the apex of
the pyramidal composition. By implication this
madonna is also Hersilia, for it is obvious that
under her influence civilization and peace will
reign in the new land. Daniel Boone, who
occupies the traditional place of Joseph in
representations of the flight into Egypt, has
changed his costume for this particular west­
ward trek. Instead of his usual garb of rough
animal skins and coonskin cap, Boone wears a
gentleman’s suit on which only a discreet
buckskin fringe refers to his role as wilderness
scout and hunter. As if to lend further author­
ity to the composition, classical imagery is
also evoked in the way the striding Boone
recalls the classical figure of the Doryphoros,
and the Louvre’s Jason or Cincinnatus is sug­
gested by the man stopping to tie his mocca­
sin at the left. 10 Of course, the landscape back­
ground is far from David’s neoclassic inter­
pretation of ancient Rome. Bingham’s stage is
pure nineteenth-century romanticism, from the
craggy mountains and deep chasms to the
blasted trees and the ominous, shadowy defile
that symbolizes the dangers of the new life
in the West. One patch of light, however,
picks out the pioneers and shines on them, as
though nature, or nature’s god, blesses their
courageous march from the green and sunny
hills behind them to the wild and barren land
ahead. In this painting, Christian iconography,
classical sculpture, romantic landscape, and
even a touch of Victorian primness blend to
form an image of civilization advancing into
the wilderness.

A far more explicit, if also more primitive,
expression of the same idea occurs in a small
painting attributed to John Gast, who did a
number of prints for Currier and Ives. Entitled
Westward Ho! (Manifest Destiny) (Fig. 5) and
dated 1872, it reveals a group of Indians, a
herd of bison, and an angry bear being pushed
ever westward—indeed, right off the picture
plane—by a covered wagon, a group of pros­
pectors, a stagecoach, a railroad train, and
a farmer plowing a field. Above this group
flies an allegorical female figure, a nineteenth­
century Hersilia, whose flowing classical drap­
eries, in that Victorian taste for a quasi-innocent
eroticism, now reveal a good deal more than
they need to. This voluptuous female, who
floats so decorously westward, is not only a
symbol of civilization but the moral justifica­
tion for westward expansion or Manifest
Destiny. Through her the benefits of culture
and modern technology are brought into the
wilderness. In one hand the floating lady car­
rries a large volume entitled simply “school
book,” while with the other she gracefully
drapes a telegraph wire across a row of poles
stretching all the way to the eastern seaboard.
Before her majestic advance, wild animals
are doomed to extinction, benighted savages
must accept domesticity, and industrial prog­
ress and Christian virtue preside over the settle­
ment of the West.

Two paintings by William T. Ranney illus­
trate a further extension of the Sabine women’s
message, if in more diluted form. The Pioneers
of 1850 (Fig. 6) endows the pioneer family
with a genre quality as they advance in a cara­
van of covered wagons through an empty and
desolate plain. But if the modern-day Hersilia
has shed her classical draperies, she still ad­
vances in her contemporary dress toward the
new land that waits to receive her brand of
domesticity and family virtues. For the sake of
the children who ride with their grandmother
in the wagon behind her, peace and domestic

FIG. 5. John Gast, Westward Ho! (Manifest
Destiny). Through the courtesy of Harry T.
Peters, Jr.
tranquility will characterize the new civilization in the West, just as it did when the Sabine women settled in ancient Rome.

Prairie Fire of 1848 (Fig. 7), also by William T. Ranney, illustrates one of the many dangers on the way. Here, in a manner more formally reminiscent of David’s Sabine Women, a cowering woman and child kneel in the foreground while the men, in a frenzy of activity, struggle to control the rearing horses and the still distant flames. The foreground composition, the drama of the situation, and the stagy contrast of struggling men and horses grouped around femininity and infancy suggest that Ranney, too, may well have held an image of the Sabine Women in his visual memory.

Classical sculpture, Renaissance art, and David’s paintings may all lie behind another work by George Caleb Bingham involving white women on the western frontier. In Martial Law, or Order No. 11 of 1869–70 (Fig. 8), Bingham illustrated a political act that had attempted to remove a group of settlers from a new land they had made their home. It has already been pointed out that the two figures of a black man and a boy at the right are based on Masaccio’s Expulsion from Eden, painted around 1427 in the church of Sta. Maria del Carmine in Florence, and that the old man to the left is the Apollo Belvedere transposed to the Missouri frontier. There is more to it than that, however, for again David’s work is evident in the pastiche that forms this overcomplicated painting. Both David’s Brutus of 1789 and the Sabine Women of 1799 are suggested by the group dominated by the heroic old man. Around him, in a pyramidal composition typical of Bingham, are clustered a number of pleading and fainting women, a child who clings fearfully to his knees, and another woman who has thrown herself upon the body of her dead husband. In the shadows behind the bearded patriarch, and forming the apex of the main pyramid, appears an equestrian figure silhouetted against the sky. This is the hated General Thomas Ewing who, during the Civil War’s Kansas-Missouri skirmishes, enforced the order evicting the Missouri border settlers from their homes. The soldier at the right, however, strikes a more heroic pose that
reflects that of Romulus in David's *Sabine Women*, while the black boy at the right echoes a similarly placed figure in the French painting. In this picture the women plead and weep, more like David's Brutus, perhaps, than the Sabine women, while the defiant role of Hersilia is played by an old graybeard who tries to prevent the force of arms from evicting the Missouri border settlers from their homes. It is as though the voice of moral authority has been transferred from the females to the active, if unsuccessful, intercession of old age. But this picture, just like the *Sabine Women*, is in a sense a vindication of squatters' rights, in which age, symbolizing the passage of time, is as important in the settlement of Missouri as it was in the settlement of the kidnapped Sabine women in ancient Rome.

One final painting deserves to be mentioned because it illustrates the degeneration of David's composition as it increasingly became a dry, academic formula, divorced from its original meaning. When Charles Christian Nahl, the artist of California's gold rush, painted *La Plaza del Toros* in 1874 (Fig. 9), he retained the rough outlines of David's picture but none of its purpose. In a pastiche of European prototypes and a caricature of the *Sabine Women*, he presented a genre scene of boisterous activity. While two mounted vaqueros look on at the left, two others, much to the distress of their mounts, display their daring horsemanship to the delight of the girls looking on at the right. In the background, customers pay to enter a bullring while an old, wooden oxcart, filled with newcomers, enters the scene. Oblivious to their surroundings, an amorous couple play for a kiss, while above them the young oxcart drover flings out his arms in a meaningless repetition of Hersilia's dramatic gesture. There is also a motley group of al fresco diners including blacks, Mexicans, a tortilla vendor, a

![Fig. 9. Charles Christian Nahl, La Plaza del Toros. Collection of the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Mrs. Silsby M. Spalding.](image)
priest, and even a bearded patriarch who would be more at home in an Old Testament scene than in a rowdy gold rush town. But even if the message of David’s painting has been lost in Nahl’s exaggerated description of life in pioneer California, his design illustrates the persistence of David’s composition in America and the influence it exerted on the young country’s academic painters.

As long as the frontier was where America felt its history was being made and its destiny fulfilled, the Sabine Women, illustrating a classical story of reconciliation brought about by heroic women who had established roots in a new land, was not, after all, an inappropriate model. Once the nation’s “Manifest Destiny” had been accomplished, with white settlements firmly established across the land and the threat of hostile action on the part of the native inhabitants completely removed, the inspiration of David’s picture no longer applied. When the noble Hersilia was transformed into a California coquette, it was time for the Sabine women to vanish from the scene.

NOTES


2. M. Killian to Capt. McKay, Quartermaster, U.S. Military Academy, West Point, Bill for engravings purchased in Paris on May 4, 1827, Manuscript collection, U.S. Military Academy Library, West Point. It should be noted that the bill refers to “Hersilia” rather than to the Sabine Women.

3. The Philadelphia artist John Neagle, for example, sketched a Classical Head sometime between 1820 and 1835. This oil sketch, now in the collection of the Helen Foresman Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Lawrence, represents a bust-length view of the Phrygian-capped equerry found at the right in David’s Sabine Women. See Leslie Griffin, “John Neagle’s Classical Head, A Print Collector’s Exercise,” Register of the Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, vol. 5, no. 8 (1979): 18–36.


11. Ibid., p. 221.