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REVIEW ESSAY


WESTERN ART'S BIG TENT

Western art continues on its own distinctive path: disdained and ignored by art critics, especially in the East; beloved by a huge public, especially in the West. Western art museums display their treasures, traveling exhibitions spread the word, and those with money vote with their wallets. If price is a gage of popularity, then historic and contemporary Western art has never been more popular.

The American West: Out of Myth, Into Reality is the catalog of a remarkable achievement—a touring exhibition, featuring 127 works of Western art, that, from inception to realization, was mounted in just three years. The achievement is all the more remarkable because several major works are included. Its title may be a bit misleading, since Reality refers not to a more realistic vision of the Western past in all its diversity, but to the idea that the mythic substance of Western art constitutes a reality all its own. This reality encompasses the celebration of national progress, the identification of Western wilderness with a New World Eden, and the glorification of the Wild and Woolly West as a masculine domain. The proposed periodization—subdividing the nineteenth century into four “phases” ending with a nostalgic commemoration of the old frontier—is problematic. The fourth phase, after all, antedates the end of the frontier. This is why the short entry arguing for the noble savage as a post-frontier construct cites a painting dating from 1847 as well as a bronze dating from 1898; obviously lamenting change and celebrating the uncorrupted nobleman of forest and prairie were constants in Western art. Otherwise, how could we account for the entire enterprise that brought George Catlin west in the 1830s?

One inspired decision in this catalog was to use the talents of others in the program at the Charles M. Russell Center for the Study of Art of the American West at the University of Oklahoma, where Peter Hassrick, the exhibition’s curator, served as director from 1998-2001. Following his extended introduction, Donna Davies, Stephanie Foster Rahill, and Bradley A. Finson contribute fifteen thematic commentaries. The seven by Rahill are sound, the seven by Finson more speculative. The “phallic butte” Finson detects in the foreground of Alfred Jacob Miller’s Trappers Saluting the Rocky Mountains is a
stretch, not only because a cigar is sometimes just a cigar, but because the formation in question does not meet the classic test for a phallic symbol: anything longer than is wide. I doubt that Indians were ever regarded as an “avaricious” foe (124), and Henry Farny’s *Rounded Up by God* clearly shows a cowboy, not a cavalryman (142). Perhaps juggling works in the exhibition and commentaries in the catalog explains certain technical errors. The notes in the text after note 23 are misnumbered, while the painting described in the text on page 70, Albert Bierstadt’s *El Capitan, Yosemite Valley, California*, is not the painting illustrated in the catalog as figure 19. Missteps aside, it is good to find a new generation of scholars grappling with the meaning of works once regarded as boringly literal and to see that the Western art tradition still invites scrutiny by inquiring minds.

*Visions of the West* is concerned with a different kind of reality. It showcases an unorthodox corporate collection heavy in material culture and folk art and unusually representative of diversity through its Native American, Mexican, African American, and cowgirl objects. “Pluralism,” according to its curator, Melissa Baldridge, is the Torch Energy collection’s defining feature. Housed in Houston, it bears a strong Texas stamp, reflective of the tastes of the company’s founder J. P. Bryan, who also collects rare Texana (unrepresented here) and firearms and spurs. The firearms are treated as the products of nineteenth-century industrial ingenuity and as works of art, while the spurs illustrate the dominance of the Hispanic tradition in shaping that supposedly most Anglo-American of cultural heroes, the cowboy. Nevertheless, guns and spurs (and cowgirl memorabilia, for that matter) challenge Baldridge’s disdain for “cowboy art,” a tradition she attributes to Frederic Remington and Charles Russell without knowing much about either evidently, since she has them converging thematically at the very point where they clearly diverge, in presenting “a simple drama where red and white square off in mortal combat” (x). Though Patricia Lim-
of spurs and firearms by, respectively, Jane Pattie and Richard Rattenbury effectively contextualize many of the objects shown, but I am still at a loss as to the focus of the cowgirl collection that elicits a breezy essay by Gail Gilchriest.

Given their contrasting definitions of reality (only Reese agrees with Hassrick that myth is reality, too), it is not surprising that the two catalogs share in common just one artist, Frederic Remington, a master of realistic reportage and a mythmaker supreme. He is represented in *The American West* by six works, including his iconic sculpture *The Bronco Buster*—a piece of cowboy art if ever there was one—and an 1888 illustration showing a white officer, Remington himself, and a column of “buffalo soldiers” riding across the Arizona desert. In *Visions of the West* Remington is represented by a single painting, a sequel showing the black troopers on the same patrol watering their horses. No red and white squaring off; just blacks and whites soldiering on together. Remington did not do many paintings showing African Americans, but he did some, and every museum wants one. Out of myth, into the New Western History.

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