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ON THE NATURE OF THE HORSE OF THE AMERICAN WEST IN NINETEENTH CENTURY ART

MARTIN E. PETERSEN

In nineteenth century America the horse was identified with the frontier and served as an image of independence and unrestrained freedom. Western travelers published in their diaries and journals accounts of sighting mustangs, the wild horses of the prairies. Washington Irving's vivid descriptions in his *Tour on the Prairies* (1835) were among the earliest.¹ In painting, literature's sister art, however, images of the western horse do not correspond with the written descriptions of the livestock that actually inhabited the area. The artists, rather, painted the ideal Arabian horse, a recognizable type developed throughout the century. The Arabian, considered the oldest pure bred horse, is distinguished from other breeds by its graceful lines and patrician carriage, by its arched neck, large, intelligent eyes, slightly concave nose, high-set tail,

slender legs and small hooves, and ivory-hard bone structure (fig. 1), although these features may appear in other breeds of which the Arabian is a progenitor. History and common sense suggest that the wild horse of the frontier was a sturdier and more robust animal than



FIG. 1. Tampico, an Arabian Horse owned by El Sheriff, Placerville, California.

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the idealized and carefully bred Arabian, and the Arabian must have offered a striking contrast in appearance to its rugged wild relative roaming the prairies and plains between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains. Artistic conventions for depicting motion and the iconography of the hunt also inspired artists to depict idealized horses, yet few artists or art historians have questioned the discordant note in the visual record nor attempted to distinguish the real from the ideal.

THE ARABIAN HORSE

Historians generally date the appearance of the modern horse in the western hemisphere at the arrival of the Spanish explorers in the sixteenth century. From Mexico horses spread gradually northward and as late as 1680 were rare in Texas and even more rare north of New Mexico. By 1700, however, they were numerous enough to allow Native Americans mobility to traverse the plains and mountains, completely changing their way of life.² The horse, upon its arrival in America, was already a mixed breed of Arabian, Barbar, and Spanish stock. Artist Frederic Remington (1861-1909), an acknowledged authority on horses and their origins, traced the American wild horse to the Barbar, from Barbary, a breed derived from Arabian stock but with decidedly different characteristics and conformation.³ According to Gerome Delacourt, the Barb "is before anything else, a mountain horse, resistant, tough, adapted to the rock and difficult terrain of their country . . . The pure blood Arab, a horse of the desert, . . . is the opposite of his mountain climbing Barbar counterpart."⁴ The Barb's firm legs, well placed under a heavier chest, and its slightly convex Roman nose distinguish it from its near relative, the Arabian. The Barb, not the Arabian, is the ancestor of the Andalusian, the Spanish horse which accompanied the conquistadors and became the principal ancestor of the American mustang.⁵

From these Spanish origins a sturdy and

unique descendent evolved, well adapted to frontier existence. Those features which once distinguished the blooded Arabian, Barb, and Andalusian were subjected to the laws of natural selection and merged in a horse with its own conformation and temperament. This was a rugged and angular critter, tough and lean, surviving by wit and speed, subsisting on sparse vegetation, and enduring severe climatic conditions. Escott North, an ex-cowboy of English origin, offered a realistic description of the frontier horse as he knew it.

He is not pretty, . . . his head does not look well set-on, he is probably ewe-necked, Roman nosed, he is certainly angular and gaunt, flat-ribbed, arched-back, close behind the chin, thin-hipped, cat-hammed, and high-stomached. At the outside, he is fourteen hands high, and he is . . . a homely brute . . . The desert stripped him of all unwanted flesh; he is flat-ribbed because that means speed; and the ability to pivot and turn like a flash; thin-hipped and cat-hammed because this spells not only speed but power.⁶

Remington's contemporary, western painter Charles M. Russell (1865-1925), succinctly described the range horse as "mean at both ends."⁷

These descriptions fall far short of the romantic, ideal image that the artists of the new nation wished to claim for the wild horse. Creative minds inclined to dream, even more than their contemporaries in an extraordinarily ebullient century, envisioned a magnificent Arabian stallion at the head of a harem of mares, thundering across wastelands and eluding would-be captors. Later writers like Zane Grey (1875-1939) retained the archetype in the twentieth century. *Wildfire*, the main character in Grey's novel of that title (1917) and *Panquitch*, the object of pursuit in *Wild Horse Mesa* (1929) are but two of the ideal steeds galloping out of Grey's imagination.

The creation of the Arabian ideal undoubtedly developed from an interest in the actual

horse. Arabians arrived in England and France from their North African homeland in the seventeenth century. Napoleon's campaigns in North Africa, the conquest of Algeria in 1830, and the breeding of racing stock in England added impetus to the increasing interest in the actual Arabian. Equally important for the ideal was the intellectual climate of the time, the height of Romanticism. The idea of Africa, an exotic place, captured the romantic imagination, and the Arabian horse was part of a general fascination with Eastern and Middle Eastern cultures. Seen through the romantic veil, the Arabian became the paradigm of horseflesh. "In some parts of Africa he appears in his grandeur; the most elegant, fleet and persevering horses are found in Arabia and are conveyed thence to various parts of the world to improve the



FIG. 2. *Mazeppa*, 1823, lithograph, Theodore Gericault. Edwin Binney 3rd Collection, San Diego, California. *Mazeppa* was a seventeenth-century Polish nobleman immortalized in a poem by Lord Byron. His tragic story captured the nineteenth-century romantic imagination.



FIG. 3. *A Turkish Groom Holding an Arabian Stallion*, n.d., oil, Carle Vernet. Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon Collection, Upperville, Virginia.

breed," wrote nineteenth century theologian Jonathan Fisher.¹ The Arabian's image appeared frequently as a major motif in nineteenth century art. The continuing mystique of the Arabian shows in the curious fact that the ancient lineage of the breed is universally accepted even though the actual pedigrees are traceable only to the early 1800s.²

It was, unquestionably, the nineteenth-century French artists who were instrumental in popularizing the ideal Arabian model in the arts. Andrew S. Ciechanowiezi has pointed out that the Paris Salon Exhibition of 1831 marked a new trend in French art as artists broke away from classical emphasis on the human body and turned to animals. "This coupled with a return to nature and a romantic interest in exotic beasts, so stimulating to the imagination, is certainly the main reason for the appearance and further development of a powerful school of animaliers."³ Among the "exotic beasts," none proved more inspirational than the Arabian horse. Theodore Géricault (1791-1824), one of the principal French Romantic painters, prepared a folio of lithographs, "scenes designed to exemplify the ideal formation of the Arabian horse" (fig. 2), which exerted a strong influence upon his colleagues.⁴ Eugene Delacroix (1798-1863) was also fascinated by the Arabians, painting colorful portraits that indicate the steed's swift grace, while "the Arab, on the threshold of his glorious career as progenitor of the world's fastest horses, was a prime favorite of [Carle] Vernet (1758-1836) who was fortunate in having witnessed the importation into France of some of the first specimens of the breed" (fig. 3).⁵ These are only three among many leading French artists to succumb to the spell of the Arabian and to find in this horse a favorite subject.

The English gentry had imported Arabians to improve their racing stock as early as the late seventeenth century, but it was almost a hundred years later before English artists represented these horses—in a desert setting complete with tents, palm trees, and attendants in oriental costumes. In much of the

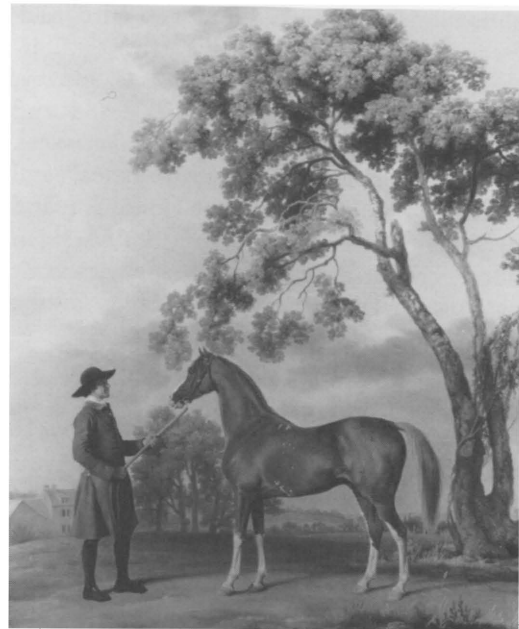


FIG. 4. Lord Grosverner's Arabian with Groom, c. 1765, oil, George Stubbs. Kimbell Art Museum Collection, Fort Worth, Texas.

English art of this sort it is unlikely that either the artist, the horse, or the owner ever saw the Arabian's land of origin.⁶ England's George Stubbs (1724-1806) is credited with creating the visual prototype about 1770 (fig. 4).⁷ It was the French painters, however, who transformed the image into a symbol of energy and passion at the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁸ The image thereafter was secure in the pictorial vocabulary of Western art. It emigrated to America with European artists and American students who had attended academies in England, France, and Germany. As for the actual horse, Ranger, also called Lindsay's Arabian, is probably the first of the breed that can be identified in the United States. He sired George Washington's Magnolio in 1789. Thomas Jefferson was also the owner of an Arabian. With the exception of such isolated instances, there is evidence of few other "desert kings" until the Civil War, when pedigrees began to be recorded here.⁹ The

authentic Arabian, therefore, can be considered a late-nineteenth-century arrival.

In art, literature, and intellectual history, the Arabian's swiftness became legend and cliché, its form became formulaic and classical, and its attitude became conventional and mannered. In England, on the Continent, and in America the image of the ideal Arabian horse dominated sublime landscapes, academic paintings, and sporting pictures. Philip Gilbert Hamerton stated the prevailing attitude.

Even the Arabs we see in Europe . . . are enough to make clear to us what the Arabian ideal is. This is the central Divine conception of horse beauty I think no artist doubts . . . [He is] much too beautiful to be admissible in pictures of rustic schools [where] he would spoil everything around him, he would be as much out of place as a Greek statue in a cottage interior.¹⁷

There was a certain incongruity, then, in portraying such horses in the primeval wilderness settings of the Badlands or Rocky Mountains, and the chances of such pampered and carefully bred horses actually surviving in the wild seem remote.



FIG. 5. California Vaqueros Roping a Steer, 1866, oil, Charles Christian Nahl. Museum of Western Art Collection, Denver, Colorado. Photograph by James Milmo.

Ignoring both convention and common sense, early artists of the American West introduced the new model of artistic horse into their paintings—with novel results. They created steeds with the highly refined and curried characteristics of a child's rocking horse. In the work of Karl Bodmer (1809-1893), George Catlin (1794-1872), and Alfred Jacob Miller (1810-1874), all pioneer artists of the trans-Mississippi frontier, the horses of the wilderness wore the veneer of the ideal Arabian. The French influence is particularly clear in Catlin's case. The French lithographers who transferred his original naive paintings to stone when publishing his folios of American Indian life for the European market gave his printed horses the refined sleekness of the ideal Arab. The artist himself worked from these lithographs when he repeated subjects in his later paintings, reproducing the French conception of the Arabian horse in his scenes of the American frontier.¹⁸

CONVENTIONS OF MOTION

The mannered treatment of horses in pictures by Charles Deas (1818-1867) and English-born James Walker (1819-1889) makes the animals resemble enameled wooden carousel horses, following their endless circular course on their callioptic turntable. That this image of the horse relies on the classic Arabian model is obvious from its concave nose, its large eyes, the small, well-shaped head it carries high, and its full and flowing mane and tail. German-born, academy trained artist Charles Christian Nahl (1818-1878) provides an image of such a horse in action. In "Vaqueros Roping a Steer" (fig. 5) the horses and riders charge through rough chaparral in a dusty landscape, pursuing a wild-eyed and frantic steer. Yet no sweat or grime soils the hide of either animal, despite the exertion of the action. These horses are dream animals, more picturesque than accurate. The end result of such works of art is an attractive albeit peculiar charm. Drama and fact are tempered by the superimposition of the pre-

conceived ideal upon the actual working horse of the West.

Such action paintings are further stylized by the conventions used to express motion in horses. There were four formulas used by artists when depicting a moving horse: the canter, the flexed plunge, the extended plunge, and the flying gallop. Only the canter was accurate in terms of the photographic evidence available to artists as early as the 1880s. The flying gallop, or rocking horse pose, was used to point out the horse's legendary swiftness. This pose, in which the horse is depicted with all legs extended off the ground, is traceable to prehistory but may be seen clearly in a drawing by Titian R. Peale (1799-1885), *Indian on Horseback* (fig. 6). Earliest examples of the flying gallop may be seen in the Lascaux cave paintings, and the convention endured in the equestrian art of the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Greeks, and, in the eastern hemisphere, in Chinese and Japanese art.¹² Only with the advent of photography, and particularly the work of Eadweard James Muybridge (1830-1904), who published his photographic study of equine movement in 1887, was this convention of rapid movement challenged in the name of realism and accuracy, but it continued to be used for the horse of the American West.

THE "NOBLE SAVAGE" AND THE HUNT

The Indian and the wild creatures of the West—including the horse—metaphorically represented the American frontier to the eastern United States and to Europe.²¹ Horse and rider symbolically roved the territory between European concepts of the "Noble Savage" in a primeval paradise and white frontier settlers' conceptions of the same people as obstacles to progress or even expressions of the malevolence of nature. Within this territory, horse and rider pursued that singular American symbol the bison, erroneously called the buffalo. As "Noble Savage," the Native American joins a number of equestrian heroes, European and American, cast in bronze for the town square or the large library



FIG. 6. Plains Indian Bowman on a Running Horse, 1819-20, pencil and watercolor, Titian Ramsey Peale. American Philosophical Society Collection, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Peale was among the first artists in the far West, accompanying Major Steven Long to the Rocky Mountains in 1820. His works include first-hand observations of the life of Native Americans.

tables of nineteenth-century homes. Monumental likenesses of national heroes began to abound in America about the end of the Civil War. Presidents Washington and Jackson, and the Indian, along with their metal mounts, continued a tradition with roots in the deification of the emperors and kings of antiquity. In painting, scenes of the hunt are somewhat reminiscent of the Indian's African or Near Eastern counterpart, Arab or Mameluke, dispatching an exotic species such as a tiger or battling the foreign invader (fig. 7). In such depictions, the mount of the battling prince is once again the ideal Arabian.

George Catlin seems to have been the first to paint a buffalo hunt, and in fact is "universally known for bringing the American Indian into fashion."²² The confrontation between a single rider and a bison is a theme frequently repeated by American artists, a motif some critics view as signaling the end of the frontier era. An extremely influential portrayal of this motif was a drawing by Felix O. C. Darley (1822-1888), done about 1842 (fig. 8).²³ Despite Darley's acknowledged debt to Catlin, there is little evidence that this particular motif was inspired by Catlin. The Darley drawing was engraved by George Cushman (1814-1876) to



FIG. 7. Mameluke on Horseback, with Bow and Arrow, n.d., watercolor, Carle Vernet. Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon Collection, Upperville, Virginia.



FIG. 8. Hunting Buffalo, 1842, ink drawing, Felix O.C. Darley. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library Collection, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

illustrate Charles F. Hofmann's story "The Fete of the Humming Bird" (or "Buffalo Hunt") which appeared in *Graham's Magazine* in 1844. The engraving itself was captioned *Hunting Buffalo*. The engraving obviously inspired an unknown artist to treat the same subject in a painting now in the Santa Barbara Museum of Art (fig. 9).²³ Although the theme of the hunter and the beast may be subject to an allegorical interpretation, the primitive painting appears to be decorative and colorful without any serious connotations or symbolic meanings.²⁴ The horse has all the features one finds in visual representations and written descriptions of the Arabian—slender legs, head held high, large and curious eyes, a slightly

concave nose. The rider manifests a noble presence.

The story is a romantic one, although it appears to have some basis in truth. It focuses on the riding prowess of a Comanche named Hummingbird and the wild nature of a celebrated white horse of the Southwest that had eluded domestication for years. Both horse and man were captives of a Colonel Dodge, of Fort Gibson, who challenged the rider to bestride the untamed mount and to kill a bison without losing his seat. The young horseman took the dare and, choosing a bull, drew, aimed, and fired, killing the bison. But he was thrown by the startled horse upon the horns of his victim. They were found "hunter



FIG. 9. *Buffalo Hunter*, mid-nineteenth century, oil, unknown American artist. Santa Barbara Museum of Art Collection: gift of Harriett Cowles Hammett Graham in memory of Buell Hammett.

and quarry mingling their gore and lying dead on the prairie."²⁵ The horse seemingly survived to lead others in hopeful pursuit.

By the 1840s the White Steed of the Prairie had raced into the pages of legend. George W. Kendal first published accounts of him in the New Orleans *Picayune* early in the decade, and J. Barber published in 1843 a popular poem celebrating the white steed's exploits. In 1851 Herman Melville introduced the horse into *Moby Dick*, describing "a magnificent milk-white charger, large-eyed, small-headed, bluff-chested, and with the dignity of a thousand monarchs in his lofty, overscoring carriage. He was the elected Xerxes of vast herds of wild horses, whose pastures . . . were only fenced by the Rocky Mountains and the Alleghanies." Melville romantically envisioned this horse as an object of "reverence and awe," and found "in its whiteness a divinity."²⁶ Melville's description corresponds to the ideal Arabian, the same model used for Darley's original drawing, the *Graham's Magazine* illustration, and the Santa Barbara Museum painting.

It is undoubtedly the legend and the engraved magazine illustration that inspired the unknown artist of the Santa Barbara painting. Although some critics have suggested that the painting was derivative of earlier compositions by Catlin, there is no evidence for this and in fact the caption for the *Graham's* engraving notes that, strangely, Catlin had never drawn the episode.²⁷ Nor was Darley's original 1842 drawing the source for the painting. In neither the painting nor the engraving does the bow overlap the rump of the bison as it does in Darley's drawing. The decorative grip of the bow and the blanket's curl about the rider's thigh, details of both painting and engraving, are missing from the drawing. Darley's knowledge of animal anatomy is refined and sophisticated in the tradition of the German academies while his foreshortening of the bison is superior to that in either the engraving or the painting. The wild-eyed expression of Darley's bull is more convincing. The painter and engraver simplified the foliage and patterns of light and dark

in the foreground as well as simplifying both figure and horse. While the engraving tends to be as literal and literary as possible, the painter chose to concentrate on the formal pattern and the rich color of the central character. In all three versions, the picture remains an expression of Romanticism. Its evocative mood and emotional drama are comparable to those of the literary source.

The image reaches its dramatic climax in later paintings of the motif, such as *The Last of the Buffalo* by Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902; see the c. 1899 version in the collection of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center). Here the Indian hero and the exotic bison no longer represent an actual hunt but a final, symbolic death struggle. By the time Bierstadt completed this particular painting the American frontier was no longer a vital part of the Romanticism that had swept Europe in the first part of the century. Instead the frontier was the staple of popular romances, such as the dime novel, which had popularized the West since the Civil War.²⁸ By 1880 industrialization, materialism, and urbanization, for better or for worse, were upon America. The West had succumbed to barbed wire, hybrid breeding, and railroads and was no longer a remote wilderness. The frontier as unexplored virginal Eden, if it ever really existed geographically, was now a myth, an illusion, accessible only in dreams and wishful thinking. The Indian, the horse, and the romantic adventure had almost disappeared. The existence of the ideal Arabian horse on the frontier had been an illusion all along, as illusive as the romantically-defined frontier itself. As early as 1873 an anonymous author had denied that the "Arabian of poetry and romance" had ever existed. Like the "Noble Savage," it was the "creation of poets and romancers."²⁹

NOTES

1. See Dawn Glanz, *How the West Was Drawn: American Art and the Settling of the Frontier* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), pp. 90-91. A description of the physical attributes of the wild

horses is missing in most accounts, which include instead ethical, moral, or other subjective descriptions like "aggressive," "spirited," and "tough."

2. Bradley Smith, *The Horse in the West* (New York: World Publishing Company, 1972), p. 14. See also Sigmund A. Levine, *The Horses the Indians Rode* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1974) for the horse and its impact upon the culture of Native Americans.

3. "Horses of the Plains," *Century Magazine* (1889); quoted in Peggy and Harold Samuels, *Frederic Remington* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981), p. 121.

4. Gerome Delacourt, "The Horses of Morocco," *Centaur* 1 (Winter, 1981): 45-47.

5. Paula Rodenas accepts the Andalusian as the horse which arrived with the Spaniards in the New World, the *Caballo de pura sangre Espanol*. "The Rein in Spain: Los Caballos de Espana," *Horseplay* 11 (December 1983): 32.

6. Escott North, *The Saga of the Cowboy* (London: Jarrolds Publisher, 1924), p. 25.

7. Quoted in Ramon F. Adams, "Charles Russell Was More Than an Artist," *Persimmon Hill* 2 (1971): 15.

8. Jonathan Fisher, *Scripture Animals* (1834; reprint New York: Weathery-Lane Books, 1972), pp. 145-147. The author was a Congregational minister from Blue Hill, Maine. His bestiary implies moral virtue and Christian behavior.

9. Judith Forbis, *The Classic Arabian Horse* (New York: Liveright, 1976), p. 231.

10. Andrew S. Ciechanowiezi, introduction, *Les Animaliers*, (New York: Bernard Black Gallery, 1963), n.p.

11. Lorenz E. A. Eitner, *Gericault: His Life and Work* (London: Orbis Publishing, 1983), p. 232.

12. Lida L. Fleitman, *The Horse in Art* (New York: William Farquhar Payson, 1931), pp. 237, 232.

13. John Baskett, *The Horse in Art* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1980), p. 15.

14. Basil Taylor, *Stubbs* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) p. 25, see also pl. 38.

15. For the horse as a traditional symbol of unbridled nature and emotion see Jean E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962), pp. 144-145; Erwin Panofsky, *Problems in Titian Mostly Iconographic* (New York: New York University Press, 1969), pp. 188-189; Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries of the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), pp. 124-125, note 7; and Dawn Glanz, *How the West Was Drawn*, p. 90.

16. Smith, *The Horse in the West*, pp. 72-74.

17. Philip Gilbert Hamerton, "Horses," *The Portfolio*, London, 1872, p. 16.

18. William H. Truettner, *Prints of the American*

West, (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1983), p. 25.

19. For a historical account of the conventionalized arrested action of a running horse see Lida L. Fleitman, *The Horse in Art*, p. xix and Stella A. Walker, *Sporting Art: England 1700-1900* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1972), p. 93.

20. For a romantic viewpoint of the Indian in nineteenth century American art see Ellwood Parry, *The Image of the Indian and the Blackman in American Art, 1590-1900* (New York: George Braziller, 1974), especially Chapter 3. In the first half of the nineteenth century, "the appearance of Indians locate the scene in the new world" writes Patricia Hill, *The American Frontier, Images and Myths* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1972), p. 6.

21. Marcel Brion, *Art of the Romantic Era*, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), p. 249. Catlin's European trip with a group of American natives was particularly successful and was an inspiration to French artists, such as Eugene Delacroix, who left drawings of the occasion.

22. See Paul C. Mills, "The Buffalo Hunter," *Archivero* 1 (Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1973), pp. 137-177, for the image as an American icon. About 1890, the plight of the Indian as a vanishing race was affecting the social conscience of America. See Joseph E. Young, "The American Frontier," *The American Personality: The Artist-Illustrator of Life in the United States, 1860-1930* (Los Angeles: Grunwald Center for Graphic Arts, 1976), p. 59.

23. Illustrated in John C. Ewers, "Not Quite Redmen: The Plains Indian Illustrations of Felix O. C. Darley," *American Art Journal* 3 (Spring 1971), fig. 5, p. 92. The engraving is used as the frontispiece, *Graham's Magazine* 26 (September 1844). The design was applied to a variety of craft objects as well as to canvas by unknown artisans and painters. See Mills, "The Buffalo Hunter."

24. See Rena N. Coen, "The Last Buffalo," *American Art Journal* 5 (November 1973): 83.

25. Charles F. Hofmann, "The Fete of the Hummingbird," *Graham's Magazine* 26 (September 1844): 99.

26. See Dawn Glanz, *How the West Was Drawn*, 1982, pp. 91-93. See also Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence, "The White Mustang of the Prairies," *Great Plains Quarterly* 1 (Spring 1981): 81-94.

27. *Graham's Magazine* 26 (September 1844), frontispiece caption.

28. Teona Tone Gneiting, "Literature and Art for the Masses: the Dime Novel," *The American Personality: The Artist-Illustrator of Life in the United States, 1860-1930*, pp. 23-26.

29. *The Aldine* 5 (1873): 110. See also S. Sidney, *The Book of the Horse* (London: c. 1875), p. 129.