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NOT SO PLAIN

ART OF THE AMERICAN PRAIRIES

JONI L. KINSEY

Since the first European encounters with the grasslands of central North America, beginning with Coronado in the mid-sixteenth century, prairies have alternately confused, dismayed, overwhelmed, depressed, and inspired those who would contend with their contradictions.¹ They have been described as being both nothing and everything, empty as well as vast, monotonous and endlessly varied. For those who saw them in their pristine state, prairies were often disorienting, a place to be lost, whereas today they have become the “heartland” where Americans look to find

their truest identity. While such disparities have frustrated many writers who have attempted to convey something of this landscape to others, visual artists have encountered special difficulties, primarily because of the prairie’s lack of geographical features that would contribute to a “view.”² The European conventions of landscape composition that dominated painting until the twentieth century were completely unsuited to such a featureless country, and the metaphorical alternatives available to literary portrayals were, for the most part, non-visual. As a result, many artists avoided the subject, even those committed to documenting their experiences and who encountered the scenery daily for long periods in their travels. Although the enterprising solutions of other artists, both in the nineteenth century and more recently, have been overshadowed by other types of landscapes, grassland pictures constitute a significant genre within American art as subtle, challenging, and fascinating as the land and history they depict.³

Prairies and visual depictions of them are misunderstood or underappreciated for a variety of reasons, both cultural and aesthetic. A

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frequent complaint is that they appear too simple, too monotonous, and, befitting their name, too plain. The land lacks the pastoral tranquility of eastern landscapes and the drama of far western ones; its most consistent feature, at least before cultivation, was flat or gently rolling terrain and endless grass, only rarely punctuated by sloughs, draws, and the all too infrequent wooded creek beds and river bottoms. As botanists, geographers, historians, and geologists are well aware, however, prairies and plains are actually highly complex in virtually every way—ecologically, historically, and metaphorically. Even the most superficial attempts to discuss them require labyrinthian negotiation of shifting locations, grassland types, species of plants, annual rainfall, and longitudinal orientation, not to mention the maze of associations that have shaped our cultural understanding of this most perplexing of regions.⁴ What appears monolithic from a distance is, upon closer scrutiny, almost infinitely varied. Indeed, the prairie's most consistent characteristic may be this paradoxical interplay between appearance and actuality, idea and fact. In direct contrast to its initial impression, the prairie offers an artistic challenge of sublime proportions and the significance of the subject is equalled only by the struggle to express it.

With the possible exception of seascapes, to which they were often likened, the grasslands' utter starkness was unprecedented for most early viewers. As the late nineteenth-century Canadian painter Edward Roper joked, "There's a good deal more scenery wanted in this country, ain't there."⁵ Until modernist aesthetics validated minimalism in the mid-twentieth century, many artists despaired of portraying the landscape without something—anything—to provide depth, a sense of scale, variety, and meaning in their pictures. Although a number of them described diverse reactions to the emptiness, including emotions associated with the romantic sublime (awe, fear, and delight, to name only a few), rarely did nineteenth-century artists translate these into images that might correspond with Euro-

pean art of the sublime, such as the paintings of England's Joseph Mallord William Turner or Germany's Caspar David Friederich.⁶

Writers also struggled to express their awe of the unbroken expanse, but even when they felt their words inadequate they could always resort to classic metaphors, such as "oceans of grass," that transform the prairie into something else, and thereby at least convey by association a mental image of uninterrupted horizons. And writers can verbally clarify abstract ideas, a tactic virtually unavailable to visual artists. When Willa Cather wrote in *My Ántonia*, "There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made,"⁷ she expressed a common theme, the *potential* of prairies, by evoking what they are through the prospect of what they can be.

The prairie's prospects were also a central theme of painters and photographers, but lacking the writer's vocabulary of metaphors and burdened with visual and aesthetic models concerning landscapes of very different sorts, artists were forced either to invent new visual strategies or to adapt existing ones. At the same time, their work was further complicated by the multiple connotations the issue of prospect had within the visual tradition and their profound implications when applied to prairie landscapes. Depending on context, "prospect" in the art world referred to the point of view fundamental to visual representation, the vantage point (often literally a promontory overlooking a scene), the scene itself, the elevation that would render such a vista accessible, the ownership (central to the meaning of eighteenth-century estate portraits known as "Prospect paintings"), and finally a looking forward in time, a futurity suggested by the view toward the horizon. It is the multivalent exploration of the prairie's "prospects" that makes the art of the region so significant, aesthetically and culturally.⁸

The "empty" grasslands did not, of course, offer many prospects in any sense of the term.⁹ They seemed an almost sublime void that both compelled and defied representation or

appropriation. Artists responded in two basic ways: either avoiding depictions of prairies altogether or taking great care to include something that would provide the prairies with prospects of any sort. Solutions were contrived from what was at hand or were simply imported: ridges, hillocks, river bluffs, and (later) windmills served as vantage points; wagons, sod houses, or Native American dwellings offered a sense of scale; and native fauna and eventually gardens, orchards, and cropland suggested abundance and potential.

Such constructions of visual interest not only served an artistic function, however, satisfying the conventions of landscape painting, they also paralleled the Euro-American development of the prairies themselves. Just as Americans transformed the actual grasslands according to their needs, preconceptions, and ideals, filling them first with small inroads of survey parties and scattered settlements, then with trees, section lines, large-scale agriculture, and superhighways, artists, too, constructed their views of prairies. Their inclusions and manipulations form a metaphorical taxonomy of the landscape's conceptual and physical transformation; but more than mere reflectors of cultural change, the images embody the aesthetic reconciliations that made those changes possible. In other words, the images document the psychological adjustments to the terrain that were necessary not only for artists, but for anyone who would confront the prairie landscape and attempt to conform it to his or her purposes.

These reconciliations, in the form of practical solutions to the visual void of the prairies, are apparent in the earliest depictions of the region by Titian Peale (c. 1799–1885) and Samuel Seymour (c. 1775–after 1823) who traveled with the government-sponsored Long expedition in 1819–20.¹⁰ Better known, however, are George Catlin, Karl Bodmer, and Alfred Jacob Miller, all of whom encountered but rarely depicted vacant prairies in their private travels during the 1830s. Even Catlin (1796–1872), who did paint a few panels containing little more than blue and green bands,

usually included Native Americans, bison, or events such as fire, to carry a dramatic narrative (Fig. 1). He was, of course, most interested in the lives of Native peoples, documenting them pictorially in the hundreds of paintings that came to comprise “Catlin’s Indian Gallery.” His response to the landscape as described in his writings suggests additional reasons he avoided painting the empty grassland. Occasionally Catlin remarked on the “allurements” of the “splendid panorama” but more often noted the gloom of silence and the tortuous sameness.¹¹

Overwhelmed by the disparity between human and geographical scale, and echoing the feelings of many explorers and settlers who found themselves apparently lost within the expanse, Catlin at the same time could envision a prospect for the prairies that eluded others. As an alternative to the annihilation he foresaw for the native people and animals of the Plains as whites encroached on their territory, he proposed “a nation’s park” that would preserve their way of life. This was practical, he argued, since “this strip of country, which extends from the province of Mexico to Lake Winnipeg on the North, is almost one entire plain of grass . . . [and] is, and ever must be, useless to cultivating man.”¹² The first to conceive the national park idea, Catlin was ahead of his time by nearly forty years (Yellowstone was designated the first national park in 1872); and even though he regarded the Plains as “uniformly sterile,” he would surely be today at the forefront of the prairie preservation movement that is still working to institute his idea, albeit without his emphasis on the human inhabitants and with a markedly different appreciation for the landscape itself.

Catlin’s contemporary Karl Bodmer (1809–93), a Swiss artist thoroughly indoctrinated in the conventions of landscape painting, virtually ignored the prairie landscape altogether. Although he painted numerous, exquisite views of rivers and spent considerable time inland during his travels with Prince Maximilian of Wied in 1833–34, the closest he came



FIG. 1. George Catlin (1796-1872), *Prairie Meadows Burning*, 1832, oil on canvas, 11 in. x 14¹/₈ in. Courtesy of the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC/Art Resource, NY; Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr.

to depicting the prairies was *Mandan Shrine* (Fig. 2) in which he carefully foregrounded the ritual objects that for him were the subject of the work. Alfred Jacob Miller (1810-74), traveling through much of the same country a few years later with the Scottish nobleman Sir William Drummond Stewart, who had hired him to produce souvenirs of the excursion, also took care to focus on dramatic action or evocative themes.¹³ In *The Lost Greenhorn* (Fig. 3), for example, Miller represents a continual fear among prairie travelers in the form of a forlorn figure searching desperately and vainly

for landmarks that might locate him amid the waving grass.¹⁴ His *Prairie Scene: Mirage* (1858-60, Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore) also embodies a common effect of the shimmering grassland that Catlin too had described:

One commences on peregrinations like these, with a light heart, and a nimble foot, and spirits as buoyant as the very air that floats along by the side of him; but his spirit soon tires, and he lags on the way that is rendered more tedious and intolerable by the tantalizing *mirage* that opens before him



FIG. 2. Karl Bodmer (1809-93), *Mandan Shrine*, 1833, watercolor and pencil on paper, 8 in. x 10³/₈ in. Courtesy of Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska; Gift of the Enron Art Foundation.

beautiful lakes, and lawns, and copses; or by the *looming* of the prairie ahead of him, that seems to rise in a parapet, and decked with its varied flowers, phantom-like, flies and moves along before him. . . ."¹⁵

For artists who followed this first generation of Euro-American portrayers, the challenge of the landscape's emptiness remained. Because of a variety of cultural and technological developments that were beginning to open the region to white settlement and commercial development, however, the prairie's

prospects were beginning to improve, literally and figuratively. In addition, artists became more adept at using indigenous features in creative ways and were less hampered by artistic conventions since landscape paintings, especially exotic or unusual ones, had become more acceptable in the United States since the 1830s.¹⁶ William Jacob Hays (1830-75), who traveled up the Missouri River in 1860, was a particularly inventive portrayer with his views of bison (Fig. 4), the animals pouring down from the ridges, becoming the rivers and monumental features the land itself lacked. Not



FIG. 3. Alfred Jacob Miller (1810-74), *The Lost Greenhorn*, 1866, oil on canvas, 17⁷/₈ in. x 23⁷/₈ in. Courtesy of Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming; Gift of The Coe Foundation.

content with the limitations of a single canvas to convey the power of such a scene, Hays made this large painting the central image of a triptych, a three-panel form historically associated with highly significant subjects such as altarpieces.¹⁷ Together, the paintings embody the prodigiousness of prairies, and by their size and formal treatment they position the subject within the high art tradition.

Expeditions themselves offered substantial material for filling visual compositions. The winding wagon trains and pack animals, as in William Henry Jackson's *California Crossing, South Platte*, (1867, Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa), could substitute for the meandering paths and

streams of more conventional landscapes; or, if standing still, horses and figures could replace trees and rocks, as they did in William Ranney's *Halt on the Prairie* (1850, Huntington Art Gallery, Austin, Texas). Beyond its formal contribution to the pictures' interest, however, the "prospecting" or investigatory mission of expeditions implied compellingly that artists sought to imbue their images with a notion of futurity.

Even the prospect of death provided subject matter that would, ironically, enliven prairie pictures. On his 1866 journey through the West with General John Pope, Worthington Whittredge (1820-1910) found graves near



FIG. 4. William Jacob Hays (1830-75), *A Herd of Buffaloes on the Bed of the River Missouri*, 1861, oil on canvas, 36 in. x 72 in. Courtesy of the Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma. 0137.533.

Kearney, Nebraska, to fill the foreground of a view (Fig. 5); indeed, throughout the nineteenth century and even today similarly stark *memento mori* poignantly evoke the prairie's desolation for those who experienced it before us. Whittredge traveled west again in 1870 in the company of fellow artists John Kensett and Sanford Gifford; although his companions were accomplished landscapists themselves, only Whittredge, better known for his scenes of dense forests in Pennsylvania, produced many images of the prairie. In contrast to those who found the grasslands oppressive, he wrote in his autobiography of being in awe of the limitless horizons:

I had never seen the plains or anything like them. They impressed me deeply. I cared more for them than for the mountains, and very few of my western pictures have been produced from sketches made in the moun-

tains, but rather from those made on the plains and with the mountains in the distance. Whoever crossed the plains at that period, notwithstanding its herds of buffalo and flocks of antelope, its wild horses, deer and fleet rabbits, could hardly fail to be impressed with its vastness and silence and the appearance everywhere of an innocent, primitive existence.¹⁸

Later in his autobiography Whittredge said of the "vastness and impressiveness of the plains," that "nothing could be more like an Arcadian landscape."¹⁹ Although he usually took care to include the defining elements of mountains in his plains pictures, the prospect of his prairie as an ambiguous place of death and dislocation was coupled with another, one that still influences our understanding of the region—a virginal paradise that even with its emptiness could suggest a prelapsarian garden.

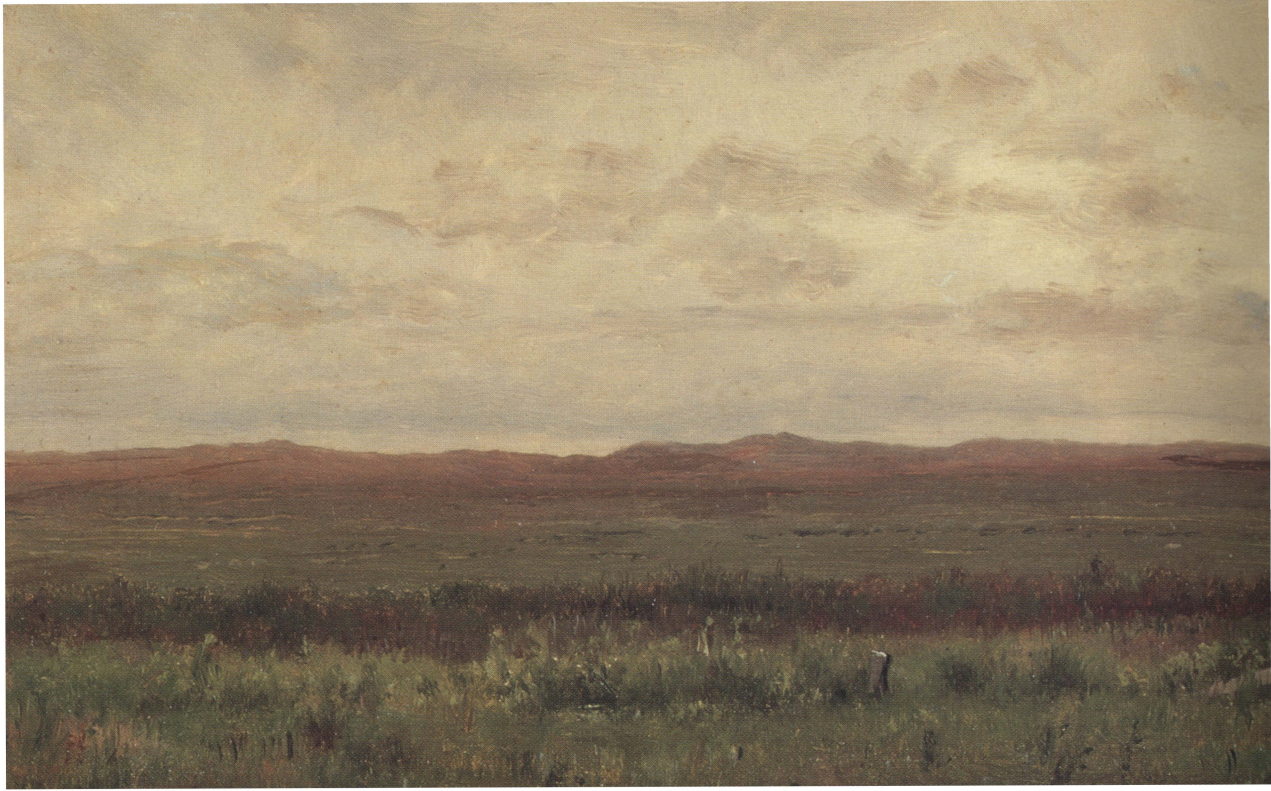


FIG. 5. Worthington Whittredge (1820-1910), *American*, Fort Kearney, Nebraska, 1866, oil on paper mounted on canvas, 18.8 cm. x 56.5 cm. Copyright © The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1995, Andrew R. and Martha Holden Jennings Fund. 69.19.

Garden of Eden associations had been central to a mythic America since Columbus's arrival and continued unabated through the nineteenth century. Whittredge notwithstanding, these metaphors became problematic in the context of early experiences of the prairies.²⁰ Landscapes of a more Arcadian sort better served the Adamic myth, and it was only after the arrival of agricultural technology—in the form of barbed wire, windmills, sodbreaking plows, and railroads, beginning in earnest in the 1870s—that the garden image could be applied to the treeless Plains.²¹ As Henry Nash Smith has explained, with the influx of optimistic settlers claiming and

cultivating land, the enthusiastic promotions of the government, railroads, and other corporations intent on increasing commerce, and the post-Civil War enthusiasm for westward expansion, it was "necessary that the settler's battle with drought and dust and wind and grasshoppers . . . be supported by the westward extension of the myth of the garden."²² That the myth bordered on tall tale seemed irrelevant; Colorado Governor William Gilpin, geologist Ferdinand Hayden, journalist Horace Greeley and others steadfastly claimed that "rain followed the plow," and that the grasslands would, in time and with careful cultivation, become a blooming garden.²³



The arcadian view did not completely displace the earlier, more elemental one, but rather alternated with it, as it has in life on the Plains, according to fluctuations in weather, economy, and politics. Thus we can have contrasts such as Sallie Cover's *Homestead of Ellsworth L. Ball* (Nebraska, c. 1880s-90s, Fig. 6), epitomizing the prairie-as-garden metaphor, and Imogene See's more desolate view, *Nebraska Farmstead* (Joslyn Museum of Art, Omaha) from about the same time. Neither of these women artists is known other than from these single pictures, and it is presumed that they were themselves homesteaders' wives who, like Abby in Bess Streeter

Aldrich's Nebraska novel, *A Lantern in Her Hand* (1928), sought cultivation of their own sort by taking brush in hand and painting the world around them.²⁴

Women's lives during settlement in the Plains region have been portrayed by diarists, historians, and writers primarily as a mixture of drudgery, filth, and loneliness, qualities clearly shown in photographs and paintings as well, such as Harvey Dunn's *Homesteader's Wife* (1920s, South Dakota Museum of Art, Brookings).²⁵ But women were also depicted as graces of the prairie, civilizing muses who brought heroism and even sophistication to the place. The most successful of these views



FIG. 6. Sallie Cover (?-?), *Homestead of Ellsworth L. Ball*, c. 1880s-90s, oil on canvas, 19½ in. x 23 in. Courtesy of Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.

present their figures *in* the landscape (Fig. 7). Through immersion they become striking by contrast to the landscape and at the same time united with the land through common elemental passions. From these representations it is only a small step to presenting women as symbols of fertility and abundance that epitomize the land itself, as in Dunn's *The Prairie Is My Garden* (1950, South Dakota Museum of Art, Brookings).

The most powerful use of such gendered symbolism, however, and one that is highly

ironic, is *Mother Earth Laid Bare* (1938, Fig. 8) by the Texas/Oklahoma artist Alexandre Hogue (1898-1994), especially when compared with Grant Wood's bucolic Iowa scene, *Fall Plowing* (1931, Fig. 9).²⁶ Like Annette Kolodny's sardonically titled *The Lay of the Land* (1975), which played off Henry Nash Smith's earlier study of the American pastoral myth, *Virgin Land* (1950), Hogue's symbolic depiction of the eroded landscape relies not only on our recognizing the Depression era drought that turned the western Plains into



FIG. 7. Laura Gilpin (1891-1979), *The Prairie*, [Illustration for Eliza M. Swift's Poem], 1917, platinum print, 5⁷/₈ in. x 7⁵/₈ in. Copyright © 1981, Laura Gilpin Collection, Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas. P1979.119.8.

the Dust Bowl, but also on our understanding the implications of a raped Mother Earth, laid bare by man.²⁷ That the man—at least if we see the painting against the foil of Wood's picture—is John Deere, whose sodbreaking plow enabled the Plains to be settled, takes on richer irony still once we learn that the painting is owned today by the Deere Corporation.²⁸ Wood's canvas depicts a shining, new Deere-style plow (a virtual anachronism by 1931) in the same position as the broken one in Hogue's. In Hogue's devastated scene, instead of bringing rain and redemption to a mythic land, the plow brings hardship and humiliation, hunger and heartache, fulfilling

the early prophecy that the land was unfit for cultivation; only now it is cultivation itself that has rendered it so.

Following the New Deal era, which focused tremendous attention on regional landscapes, including those of the Plains, modernist abstraction from the 1950s through the 1970s virtually ignored landscape subjects. Landscape has reemerged recently, however, with a strength recalling the nineteenth century, and prairiescapes of all sorts are receiving new attention, not only by westerners with whom they have long been popular, but by east coast dealers, critics, and scholars as well. In some ways, the art world has finally grown into the

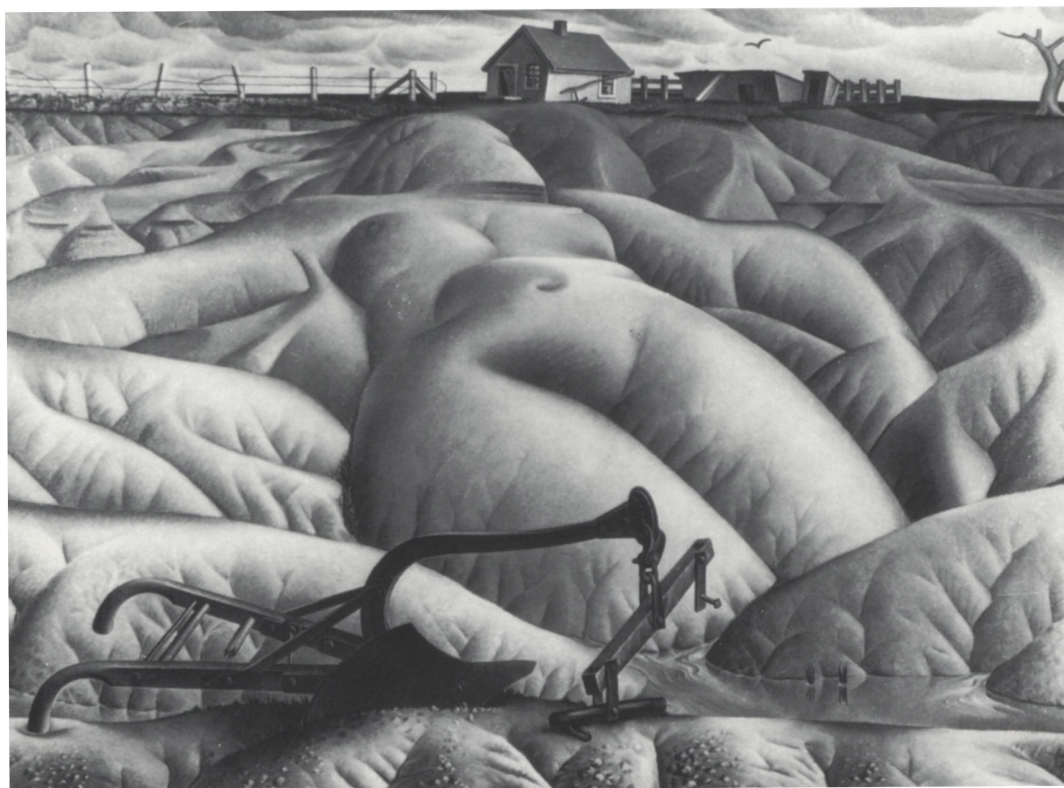


FIG. 8. Alexandre Hogue (1898-1994), *Erosion No. 2, Mother Earth Laid Bare*, 1938, oil on canvas, 44 in. x 56 in. Courtesy of the Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

subject, and as contemporary Americans struggle ever more vainly to locate themselves within an increasingly complex society, the prairie has become a focal point for cultural identification, reflecting back to us cherished ideals of harmony with the land—and for those with more fortitude, pragmatism, or insight, our vainest follies and tragic mistakes.

Today a growing group of artists, such as Harold Gregor, James Winn, Terry Evans, Anne Burkholder, and Keith Jacobshagen, are turning to the prairies for inspiration. In their hands, with the perspective of twentieth-century developments in art, land use, and technology, we encounter a very different place than did nineteenth-century visitors and settlers. The contemporary prairie has been trans-

formed to the point of its having what might be thought of as almost too many prospects. The land has been filled and altered to the brink of losing its identity; instead of looking futilely for something to break the expanse as our predecessors did, we must search for the uninterrupted view. Moreover, it is a contested landscape, with competing force—from environmentalists to agribusiness people, industrialists to suburban dwellers—vying for the prairie's future; and except in times of natural catastrophe such as tornadoes, droughts, or floods, it seems as if humans have gained the upper hand.

Today's grasslands, to borrow from the name of the southwestern Illinois landscape Charles Dickens visited in the 1840s, are



FIG. 9. Grant Wood (1891-1942), *Fall Plowing*, 1931, oil on canvas, 30 in. x 40 ³/₄ in. Courtesy of John Deere Art Collection, Moline, Illinois.

“Looking-Glass Prairies.”²⁹ The prairie is no longer alien or forbidding; indeed, it is mostly as manicured, trimmed, combed, and accessorized as are we ourselves. Fulfilling the desires of nineteenth-century artists and settlers, the actual landscape has been framed and endowed with all manner of cultivations, and we must look closely for its original characteristics, just as aging faces strain for vestiges of youth when confronted with a mirror. At the same time, the prairies reflect our cultural uncertainties and disagreements, becoming the locus for continual debates over land use and its meaning. Like figures in the tall grass of the virgin prairie, the grasslands now throw both the elemental and the human into high

relief, the character of each revealed by the other.

For artists the competing prospects and challenges of the modern prairie are no less compelling than the dilemma of landscape encountered by artists in the nineteenth century. Instead of relying solely on the traditional linear perspective that characterized earlier landscape views, artists now present the region from a wide variety of angles—looking down from airplanes, from within the land itself as it becomes a sculptural form of its own (as in the remarkable crop art of Kansan Stan Herd), and sometimes from ambiguous points of view, as if we are floating tenuously between earth and sky, as in many of Keith



FIG. 10. Keith Jacobshagen (1941–), *Havelock Elevator, Evening of Ash Wednesday 1993*, oil on canvas, 20 in. x 48 in. Courtesy of the Great Plains Art Collection, Center for Great Plains Studies, University of Nebraska; Gift of the Friends of the Center for Great Plains Studies and Dr. Leon S. McGoogan.

Jacobshagen's spectacular paintings (Fig. 10). The old notion of prospect as vantage point has finally been successfully commingled with its other connotation—that of possibility—as the artist mediates the prairie's manifold values to contemporary culture.

Throughout it all, in the midst of competing visions and transformed from their original state, the grass and the horizon retain their power; and, as the contemporary prairie artist endeavors to reveal, we are made more significant by our relationship with them. Writer Theodore Winthrop put it this way in the 1860s:

Breadth of thought they claim, these dwellers on the sweeping prairies, a wide worldly range and terrestrial stride of seven leagues . . . their landscape is all horizon—limitless, oceanlike, with no pyramid mountain monuments of deathless heavens that are above the earth. In prairieland thought may go galloping onward unchecked, saying *this I will locate* . . .³⁰

It seems that location is what prairies and their representations are really about. Disorienting and dislocating us from familiar references and reliable features, they simultaneously offer us a prospect from which to confront our own true nature.

NOTES

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Great Plains Grassland Symposium in Lincoln, Nebraska, in March 1994. An exhibition, *Plain Pictures: Images of the American Prairie*, based on this research, will open at the University of Iowa Museum of Art in 1996. I am grateful for a University of Iowa Interdisciplinary Faculty Research Grant at the Center for Advanced Studies that enabled me to complete the revisions, and especially to my colleagues from literature and geography, professors Robert Sayre and Rebecca Roberts, for their invaluable help in shaping my understanding of prairies.

1. Francisco Vazquez de Coronado was the first European explorer of the Plains in 1541. See George P. Hammond and Agapito Rey, eds., *Narratives of the Coronado Expedition, 1540-1542* (Albuquerque: The Quivira Society, 1940).

2. For more on the literary treatment of the prairies see Robert Thacker, *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989).

3. While landscape art of other American regions has received extensive attention in major exhibitions, books, and scholarly articles, prairie painting has been discussed only within discussions of western art more generally or in scattered articles. Some of these include Roger B. Stein, "Packaging the Great Plains: The Role of the Visual Arts," *Great Plains Quarterly* 5 (Winter 1985): 5-23; Howard Lamar, "Seeing More than Earth and Sky: The Rise of a Great Plains Aesthetic," *Great Plains Quarterly* 9 (Spring 1989): 69-77; and Lamar, "Image and Counterimage: The Regional Artist and the Great Plains Landscape," in *The Big Empty: Essays on Western Landscapes As Narrative*, ed. Leonard Engel (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), pp. 75-92.

4. Despite the many different prairie types (such as tallgrass, shortgrass, mixed grass, and high plains) and the geographical distinctions between prairie and plains terrain, I have used "plains" and "prairies" interchangeably. While scientifically incorrect, this usage is consistent with both nineteenth- and twentieth-century common designation for the grasslands of central North America.

5. Edward Roper, *By Track and Trail Through Canada* (London: W. H. Allen, 1891), p. 51, cited in Ronald Rees, "Painting, Place, and Identity: A Prairie View," *Environmental Aesthetics: Essays in Interpretation*, ed. Barry Sadler and Allen Carlson (Victoria: University of Victoria, 1982), pp. 117-41.

6. Although there is not room to discuss this complex aesthetic here, at least some of the artists of the prairie were familiar with European aesthetic theory, including the sublime, which was frequently discussed in art journals such as *The Crayon* or *The Aldine*.

7. Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (1918; rpt. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1977), p. 7.

8. Definitions adapted from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1971, s.v. prospects. For more on prospect painting and related issues see Stephen Daniels, "Goodly Prospects: English Estate Portraiture, 1670-1730," in *Mapping the Landscape: Essays on Art and Cartography*, ed. Nicholas Alfrey and Stephen Daniels (Nottingham: University Art Gallery, Castle Museum, 1990), pp. 9-17; and Albert Boime, *The Magisterial Gaze: American Landscape Painting, 1830-1865* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991). Other studies that discuss the development of visual claiming of the American landscape, although in different ways, include Angela Miller, *Empire of the Eye: Land-*

scape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); and William Truettner, ed., *The West As America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

9. See Joni Kinsey, Rebecca Roberts and Robert Sayre, "Prairie Prospects: The Aesthetics of Plainness," forthcoming in *Prospects: An Annual of American Studies*, 1996.

10. For all their significance these artists remain under researched. See, however, Kenneth Haltman, "Figures in a Western Landscape: Reading the Art of Titian Ramsay Peale From the Long Expedition to the Rocky Mountains, 1819-1820" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1992); John Francis McDermott, "Samuel Seymour: Pioneer Artist of the Plains and Rockies," *Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution*, 1950 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1951), pp. 495-509; and Jessie Poesch, *Titian Ramsay Peale (1799-1885) and His Journals from the Wilkes Expedition* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1961).

11. George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs and Condition of the North American Indians*, (London: NP, 1841) 1: 18-19, 218.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 261. Although Catlin's dismissal of the Plains turned out to be mistaken, it was accurate enough given the technology of his day. See William Goetzmann, *Exploration and Empire: The Explorer and the Scientist in the Winning of the American West* (1967; rpt. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), p. 62. For a substantial bibliography on the desert/garden paradox see John L. Allen, "The Garden-Desert Continuum: Competing Views of the Great Plains in the Nineteenth Century," *Great Plains Quarterly* 5 (Fall 1985): 207-20.

13. See Ron Tyler, ed., *Alfred Jacob Miller: Artist on the Oregon Trail* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1982).

14. Miller's image was based on one of the Stewart party who became lost and nearly died. See Tyler, *Alfred Jacob Miller*, text accompanying plate 52, n.p.

15. Catlin, *North American Indians* (note 11 above), p. 218.

16. See Frederic Church's exotic landscapes of the late 1850s and 1860s, especially *Niagara* (1857, Corcoran Museum of Art). These paintings, and others like them by artists such as Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran, capitalized on the taste for the unusual and were enormously popular.

17. Hays painted numerous versions of buffalo herds in the early 1860s, many of which were designated by versions of the title "The Herd on the Move." The three massive paintings that comprise the triptych are now designated *A Herd of Buffaloes*