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Review of *The West as Romantic Horizon* By William H. Goetzmann, Joseph C. Porter, and David C. Hunt

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Hunt. Omaha: Center for Western Studies, Joslyn Art Museum, 1981. Distributed by the University of Nebraska Press. Foreword, introduction, illustrations, notes, index of artists. 128 pp. \$34.50 cloth. \$18.95 paper.

This book, the first major publication of the Center for Western Studies at Omaha's Joslyn Art Museum, serves as "an introduction to the InterNorth collections" housed at the museum. The three collections are the Maximilian-Bodmer cache of 427 sketches and watercolors, the Alfred Jacob Miller collection of more than one hundred paintings, and the Artists of the Western Frontier collection (eighty-six works by thirty-seven artists, including Catlin, Eastman, Bierstadt, Remington, and Russell).

From this bountiful feast we are served only thirty-six color plates—fourteen Bodmers, thirteen Millers, nine of the Western Frontier group—and arguably too many of these are familiar. But such is the nature of introductions. Certainly the fare offered here whets the appetite: the volume is uncommonly handsome in design, and the visual material—inherently engrossing in subject—is sharp in image, true in color, and delicate in nuance.

The text keys less specifically to the paintings than one might expect. In the title essay, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian William H. Goetzmann takes a cue from literary history to conclude that romanticism is a common denominator in Western art of the nineteenth century. Thus "one way of understanding" this art, of tying it to the "mainstream of Euro-American thought," is to view it as an expression of "romantic sensibility." Although romanticism "never stood still," Goetzmann suggests that there are relatively stable and identifiable characteristics that appear in Western art throughout the century. He labels these "pastoral elegaic" (Miller, Ranney); "scientific and ethnological" (Catlin, Bodmer); "pastoral-picturesque" (Stanley); "grand and sublime" (Bierstadt, Moran, Whittredge); "epic heroic" (Remington), and "nostalgic" (Russell). This is a stimulating hypothesis, skillfully

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argued and defensible in its main outlines, but for the literal-minded spectator who may resist the synthesis or simply object to this sort of fractioning, the other sections of the text may prove more satisfying.

Joseph C. Porter, the Joslyn's curator of Western American History and Ethnology, follows Goetzmann's lead—albeit at some distance—in “The Romantic Horizon in History and Ethnology.” He explores the notion of the “dual legacy” of Western art, art-as-document and art-as-myth. The duality certainly appears in the pictures, but probably less as a parallel event than as a shifting emphasis, as the essentially documentary approach of the artist-explorers gave way to romantic glorifications of the landscape and finally to end-of-the-century “mythic Wild West” interpretations. Porter is at his best when he can read art as a document, and the most consequential part of his essay delineates the significance of the achievement of Catlin, Miller, Bodmer, and Prince Maximilian. He especially pays tribute to the “hard-working, courageous artists” of the West whose work remains “a permanent legacy that continues to show the reality of the American past.”

David C. Hunt, the Curator of Western American Art at the Joslyn, has prepared the artists' biographies and catalogues of works. His entries are fuller and more carefully researched than those one commonly encounters in biographical compendia, and it is a great boon to have them between two covers. Hunt includes not only the well-known masters of the nineteenth century but also lesser lights, and, since the Joslyn's “Artists of the Western Frontier” collection includes twentieth-century people, he covers several important later figures. It is an able compilation that rounds out a pleasingly useful book.

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