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**Review of *The Rocky Mountains: A Vision for Artists in the Nineteenth Century* By Patricia Trenton and Peter H. Hassrick & *Karl Bodmer's America* Introduction by William H. Goetzmann**

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# BOOK REVIEWS

## REVIEW ESSAY

### RECENT INTERPRETATIONS OF WESTERN AMERICAN ART

*The Rocky Mountains: A Vision for Artists in the Nineteenth Century.* By Patricia Trenton and Peter H. Hassrick. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. xix + 418 pp. \$65.00. Published in association with the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming.

*Karl Bodmer's America.* Introduction by William H. Goetzmann. Annotations by David C. Hunt and Marsha V. Gallagher. Artist's Biography by William J. Orr. Lincoln: Joslyn Art Museum and University of Nebraska Press, 1984. List of plates, foreword, preface. xi + 376 pp. \$65.00.

Historians have generally paid less attention to western art than to other facets of western American cultural history such as literature, religion, and education. Perhaps this lacuna results from historians' lack of knowledge about art history or from their reluctance to venture into the tangled thickets of art criticism. At any rate, except for the useful book-length studies of John C. Ewers and Robert Taft (both nonhistorians) and the less extensive but probing commentaries of William Goetzmann and two of his students, Brian Dippie and Joseph C. Porter, historians only occasionally discuss artistic treatments of the American West.<sup>1</sup> Yet the two books under review and other publications appearing in the last few years suggest that a more analytical group of commentators is at work on western art. Their studies—and the two books cited here—promise much-needed reevaluations of artistic works

about the nineteenth- and twentieth-century American West.

In this regard, *The Rocky Mountains* is noteworthy because it adds much to one's understanding of western frontier art. Patricia Trenton and Peter Hassrick, art historians with several publications on western art to their credit, concentrate here on one subregion of the West—the Rocky Mountains broadly considered—and one major topic, landscape depictions of the Rockies. In discussing landscapes painted from about 1820 to 1900, the authors provide detailed commentaries on artists who traveled with explorers like Stephen H. Long and John C. Frémont, with European and American patrons, with government surveys, with overland trail and other private groups, and who worked as reporters for magazines.

*The Rocky Mountains* includes discussions of dozens of artists but devotes separate chapters to the well-known artists Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran and contains extended commentaries on such painters as Samuel Seymour, Alfred Jacob Miller, Edward and Richard Kern, John Mix Stanley, and Thomas Worthington Whittredge. Since this study emphasizes landscape paintings, it omits extensive treatments of George Catlin, Frederic Remington, and Charles Russell, who were more intrigued by western characters than by western settings.

Particularly noteworthy in this volume is the extensive research of Trenton and Hassrick. Although this book is in part a *catalogue raisonné* for a traveling exhibit of western landscapes that opened at the Whitney Gallery in the Buffalo Bill Historical Center at Cody,

Wyoming, in early summer 1983, the volume transcends that genre. In addition to providing a pleasing pictorial survey of western landscape painting—54 color and 129 black-and-white plates—the authors display extraordinary talents as historical researchers. They make extensive use of general works by Ewers, Taft, and Goetzmann and of the book-length studies by Gordon Henricks, Thurman Wilkins, and Carol Clark on Bierstadt and Moran, and they also have utilized obscure printed sources, unpublished dissertations, and numerous manuscript sources in archives throughout the United States and Europe. No other general study of western art has been more thoroughly researched than this very appealing work. The footnotes and bibliography, which extend to more than sixty oversized pages, will be a handy bibliographical source for students and scholars interested in western art and cultural history.

Moreover, Trenton and Hassrick do not limit their narrative to biographical commentaries and historical backgrounds in American and continental artistic traditions; they also provide critical readings of the major paintings they discuss. General readers as well as specialists in western art will find here many provocative and useful evaluations.

Quite different in form and approach is *Karl Bodmer's America*, which follows an organization typical of most recent studies of western art.<sup>2</sup> A large, well-bound, and handsome book containing 359 plates—257 full color and 102 black and white—this volume of Bodmer's American paintings is divided into three parts: William Goetzmann's "The Man Who Stopped to Paint America" (pp. 1–23), "The Plates" with annotations by David C. Hunt and Marsha V. Gallagher (pp. 25–347), and William J. Orr's "Karl Bodmer: The Artist's Life" (pp. 349–76). Together these sections supply the best study of Bodmer's interpretation of the American frontier.

Goetzmann's overview of Bodmer is particularly impressive. In addition to providing brief commentary on Bodmer's artistic training, his acquaintance and travels with his sponsor Prince Maximilian of Wied, and Bodmer's years

after his return from the New World, Goetzmann *analyzes* several of Bodmer's major paintings, detailing specific cultural influences on these and other works. These interpretations of individual paintings and Goetzmann's apt discussions of cultural and intellectual currents that helped shape Bodmer's art are the most penetrating scholarly contribution of this volume. By stressing Bodmer's interest in varied American landscapes, including his little-known work on the Mississippi and Missouri rivers and their wild, tangled shorelines, and other aspects of western scenery, Goetzmann adds much to the limited description of Bodmer as a painter of frontier Indians. Indeed, in its illuminating insights, in its emphasis on these new vistas of Bodmer's career, and in its analytical quality, Goetzmann's essay is a paradigm for the kind of evaluation that western art merits and needs.

If the annotations of Hunt and Gallagher for the plates are more descriptive and less insightful than Goetzmann's superb essay, they nonetheless provide useful historical and scenic details for the chronologically arranged paintings. These brief commentaries date Bodmer's paintings and supply particulars of his trip with Prince Maximilian in 1832–34, but they might also have added information on the artistic traditions that influenced Bodmer's work. In the final section, Orr adds details on Bodmer's early years and much new material on the artist's final years in Germany and France, all of which is based on thorough use of Prince Maximilian's manuscript diaries and correspondence between the prince and Bodmer. These contributions, particularly the probing comments by Goetzmann and the eye-catching color reproductions, make this a notable volume for scholars and general readers.

Many books on western art have followed a format similar to that of *Karl Bodmer's America*, with major stress on samples of an artist's work (at least as many in color as costs allow) and minor emphasis on analysis of these artistic productions. One hopes, however, that these emphases will be reversed, allowing more scholarly commentary on individual painters and paintings and additional discussions of the

cultural and intellectual backgrounds. A few recent volumes suggest that this much-needed change is gradually occurring.

Brian W. Dippie's *Remington and Russell*, for example, seems at first glance solely a visually appealing collection of Sid W. Richardson's paintings by these two well-known western artists.<sup>3</sup> It is much more, however, for Dippie practices what he preaches when he argues, "Few things are more desperately needed in western art studies than critical comparisons artist to artist . . . and within each artist's oeuvre" (p. 15). While a bit less analytical than Dippie, Carol Clark adds valuable cultural context in her readable introductory commentary in *Thomas Moran: Watercolors of the American West*. Equally revealing is Martha Kingsbury's discussion of four artists of the Pacific Northwest—Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, Kenneth Callahan, and Guy Anderson—who deserve much more attention.<sup>4</sup>

In still another recent publication, *Taos: A Painter's Dream*, Patricia Janis Broder produces the best general study of the notable artists who congregated in Taos, New Mexico, in the early decades of this century. One could wish, nonetheless, for more analytical readings of individual paintings in Broder's handsome book. Much more notable in its handling of historical backgrounds and also impressive in its nearly exhaustive utilization of manuscript materials is David J. Weber's *Richard Kern: Expeditionary Artist in the Far Southwest*, a study that William Goetzmann rightly calls first-rate.<sup>5</sup>

If historians and art historians have recently begun to provide penetrating studies of nineteenth-century frontier artists, they have, for the most part, paid much less attention to painters of the twentieth-century West. Patricia Janis Broder's *The American West: The Modern Vision* is an introduction to some artists of the modern period, but the author does little with the Far West, the Northwest, or the Great Plains and, in turn, overemphasizes the Southwest, the focus of most of her earlier studies. While Sharyn Rohlfen Udall utilizes a biographical approach similar to Broder's in

*Modernist Painting in New Mexico 1913-1935*, she treats such artists as Andrew Dasburg, John Marin, Georgia O'Keeffe, Maynard Dixon, and Victor Higgins in a more penetrating fashion. Udall also makes good use of manuscript and other original sources in her analyses of these painters.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the most systematic work on modern western artists has been that on the midwestern triumvirate, Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood. No recent scholar has produced a better study of Benton than Matthew Baigell's *Thomas Hart Benton* (1973), but Joseph S. Czeszchowski has compiled a useful selection of brief essays and sections from longer works in his study of two of the landscape painters, *John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood: A Portrait of Rural America*. These helpful selections, plus an appealing collection of black-and-white and color reproductions, add up to a rewarding book on these regional figures. Even more analytical and penetrating is Wanda Corn's *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision*, a revealing biographical and interpretive study of Wood's significance as an artist. The book places Wood in the larger context of regionalism and includes a probing section on *American Gothic* as an artistic work and a popular icon. Corn utilizes numerous manuscript sources and provides excellent illustrations in her fine work.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, if historians and art critics are to continue the high level of work displayed in the two books under review and in the earlier studies of such scholars as John Ewers and William Goetzmann, they must keep their topics in historical perspective and be more analytical and evaluative. Moreover, they must ask more questions of their materials. Do western painters, for example, illustrate major trends in American and western American cultural history; or, to expand the regional context of the question, does the historiography of Frederick Jackson Turner, Walter Prescott Webb, and James Malin help explain regional sociocultural forces that have influenced the works of many western artists? These and other similar questions must be raised; indeed, scholars such as

Goetzmann and his students are on the right track in calling for more interpretation and analysis in studies of western art. One hopes, in short, that the gradually increasing number of conceptual studies of western artists will continue—even increase—so that scholars and general readers alike can enjoy academically sound as well as handsomely produced studies of western art. This balance between analysis and appealing reproduction should be the major goal of forthcoming research and publication on western American art.

#### NOTES

1. Of Goetzmann's several notable works, see especially his illuminating comments on western art in *Exploration and Empire: The Explorer and Scientist in the Winning of the American West* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966) and his essay "The West as Romantic Horizon" in *The West as Romantic Horizon* (Omaha, Nebr.: Center for Western Studies, Joslyn Art Museum, 1981). Porter has a fine essay, "The Romantic Horizon in History and Ethnology," in *The West as Romantic Horizon* and a brief, useful essay on Prince Maximilian of Wied in *Views of a Vanishing Frontier* (Omaha, Nebr.: Center for Western Studies, Joslyn Art Museum, 1984). Dippie has edited a new edition of "Paper Talk": *Charlie Russell's American West* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), published stimulating essays on Frederic Remington, and is at work on a study of government support of early western American art.

2. See, for example, Ron Tyler, ed., *Alfred Jacob Miller: Artist on the Oregon Trail* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1982), and D. Duane Cummins, *William Robinson Leigh: Western Artist* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press; Tulsa: Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, 1980).

3. Dippie, *Remington and Russell* (Austin:

University of Texas Press, 1982). For an excellent cultural analysis of Remington and his times, see Ben Merchant Vorpahl, *Frederic Remington and the West: With the Eye of the Mind* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978). On the other hand, Peggy and Harold Samuels in their *Frederic Remington: A Biography* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1982) provide exhaustively detailed chapters but seem reluctant to analyze and evaluate the facts they have gathered.

4. Clark, *Thomas Moran: Watercolors of the American West* (Austin: University of Texas Press for the Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1980); Martha Kingsbury, "Four Artists in the Northwest Tradition," *Northwest Traditions* (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 1978).

5. Broder, *Taos: A Painter's Dream* (Boston: Little, Brown for New York Graphic Society, 1980); Weber, *Richard Kern: Expeditionary Artist in the Far Southwest, 1848-1853* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985).

6. Broder, *The American West: The Modern Vision* (Boston: Little, Brown for New York Graphic Society, 1984); Udall, *Modernist Painting in New Mexico, 1913-1935* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984).

7. Czeszchowski, *John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood: A Portrait of Rural America* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1981); Corn, *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983). The starting point for research on Benton, Curry, and Wood is the very helpful bibliographical listing in Mary Scholz Guedon, *Regionalist Art: Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood: A Guide to the Literature* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1982).

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