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EUROPEAN INFLUENCE ON THE VISUAL ARTS OF THE GREAT PLAINS

AN INTRODUCTION

From colonial times, American art has been subject to European stylistic influences, but art historians have not heretofore devoted much attention to the effect of such influences on the visual art of the Great Plains. Thus this topic seemed a fruitful theme for the 1984 annual symposium of the Center for Great Plains Studies, as was proved by the variety of proposals elicited by a call for papers. Many of the submitted papers concerned the various manifestations of Romanticism and its effects on painting in and of the region. Romanticism, an imprecise term, covers a multitude of feelings, philosophies, and beliefs, ranging from vague longings for distant pasts and distant places to the desire to establish an individual existence in an ideal society. Romanticism tinged many of the developments that have shaped our modern world, including the rise of democracy, the attempt to create utopian communities, the systematic development of the sciences, and the process of founding nations defined by linguistic and cultural affinities. All these notions in one way or another influenced the arts. The four articles that follow present a cross section of the papers presented at the symposium, more of which will appear in future issues of the *Great Plains Quarterly*.

Stephen Behrendt's "Originality and Influ-

ence in George Caleb Bingham's Art" questions the importance of influences and cautions against inflating them. Behrendt does not deny that Bingham, like many of his contemporaries, was strongly attracted to the Biedermeier style of neoclassicism as taught at the Düsseldorf Academy in Germany. Emmanuel Leutze's familiar painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware* epitomizes the Düsseldorf manner of uniting theatrical, baroque light effects with neoclassical linearity and also sets recent historical figures in postures copied from Greco-Roman sculpture. Behrendt contends, however, that Bingham's uses of antique poses and backgrounds like those of French painter Claude Lorrain are more than stylistic. These devices gave viewers a point of reference, enabling them to understand experiences outside of their own particular realm. The Romantic dreams of far-away places, and for the eastern viewer, scenes from Bingham's Missouri frontier had an allure as powerful as scenes of the mysterious Orient. Pictures such as the *Jolly Flatboatmen* and *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri* excited the viewer's imagination; but while the dancing boatman may have been copied from the Hellenistic sculpture *The Dancing Satyr*, and while the background of the *Fur Traders* may have been Claudian, Bingham's paintings

emphasized American traits: freedom, and life in and of nature.

The Romantic also dreams of times past. Kirsten Powell demonstrates in her article, "Cowboy Knights and Prairie Madonnas: American Illustrations of the Plains and Pre-Raphaelite Art," that popular illustrators saw many similarities between the myth of the West and the Arthurian legend. The English Pre-Raphaelite painters, Ford Madox Brown, Edward Burne-Jones, William Holman Hunt, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, recreated scenes from medieval romance in a style loosely based on early Italian Renaissance painting. Their emphasis on somewhat sentimental, quasi-religious themes, painted with meticulous detail, inspired the American illustrator Howard Pyle, who in turn influenced his students Harvey Dunn, Frank Schoonover, and N. C. Wyeth. They equated the cowboy with their romanticized version of the medieval knight. The cowboy's fights against cattle rustlers and land grabbers took on epic dimensions as the humble proletarian reached aristocratic status. Right and wrong were clearly defined in the popular cowboy tales and illustrations. No matter how simple and unsophisticated the hero may have been, he knew what was right, and he did it. The women in his life, as we know from the short stories and the films and television series that succeeded them, were saintly even when barroom-tarnished. Powell shows us how the Pre-Raphaelite vision of Saint George rescuing the world from evil and of the Virgin Mary bearing the hope of the future helped define the popular conception of the hero and heroine of the Old West.

For the Swedish immigrant artist Birger Sandzén, the future lay in central Kansas. Emory Lindquist writes that Sandzén, like his countrymen Carl Larsson and Anders Zorn, studied in France, but unlike them, he was not content to return to Sweden. Kansas and the western landscape in general had on Sandzén the same effect that the Arlesian landscape had on Vincent Van Gogh, whose work Sandzén's superficially resembles. Like Van Gogh, Sandzén heightened his palette and broadened his

forms when confronted with a new environment. In Kansas the Swedish artist found a muse that provided constant inspiration in cottonwood trees silhouetted against a bright blue sky and in purple shadows across an orange and straw-colored ground. Sandzén represents Impressionism—the last phase of Romanticism—stressing the transitory brilliance of nature's colors. Both as a painter and as a teacher at Bethany College in Lindsborg, Kansas, Sandzén provided firsthand experience of European Postimpressionism to several generations of viewers and students.

Roger B. Stein's article, "Packaging the Great Plains: The Role of the Visual Arts," revised from his keynote address at the symposium to become the lead article of this issue, defines the role of the regional scholar and urges us to look beyond obvious and immediate references. Geography, history, and politics each contribute to the development of a regional style and may in fact be more important than the devices employed in the creation of the art. Artists live in a real world, and their choices are determined by thoughts and things outside the subject at hand. In order to be effective, regional art must communicate with an audience beyond the region and yet remain true to its place and time. The student of regionalism, then, must be aware of many factors artistic, geographic, historical, and political in order to create a true picture of the artist's influences and intentions. After leading us through a provocative lesson on regional theory and practice, Stein demonstrates how one French painting, Jean-François Millet's *The Sower*, ultimately influenced Lee Laurie's nineteen-foot sculpture of a sower atop the Nebraska State Capitol. In these four articles we can see that, although European examples unquestionably influenced the artists of the Great Plains, the artists transformed those examples into American statements.

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