

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Winter 1985

Packaging The Great Plains The Role Of The Visual Arts

Roger B. Stein

State University of New York-Binghamton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Stein, Roger B., "Packaging The Great Plains The Role Of The Visual Arts" (1985). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1827.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1827>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

PACKAGING THE GREAT PLAINS

THE ROLE OF THE VISUAL ARTS

ROGER B. STEIN

To consider the influence of Europe upon the visual arts of the Great Plains is to engender not only a new body of information but also some complex methodological questions of concern not only to the specialist but to the student of the region more generally. How does a regional perspective focus one's investigation? How does "influence" work within a culture and how, specifically, that of Europe upon American and western culture? Finally, how do the visual arts function to shed light on these broader questions? It is the last of these questions that I will address here, not as an expert on the Great Plains, for my experience as a student of regionalism as a phenomenon, of European influence on American culture, and of art history as a disciplinary approach, has lain elsewhere.¹ I am convinced, however, that the problems of method and approach that the

historian of the art of the Great Plains faces are part of a larger picture, and thus we will move from questions of method toward their application to the Great Plains in particular.

THE REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Our premises need to be clear at the outset. The visual art of the Great Plains should not be considered as an inert body of disconnected pieces of information about the region, nor are pictures a series of windows, passive illustrations, or "reflections" of the "reality" of the region. Works of art—indeed, all facts and artifacts—come to us already packaged by our questions and framed by our perspectives. Charts of rainfall in the Great Plains presume that there is a question about the influence of precipitation upon vegetation and through that upon the life of the region. A computer-generated map of Democratic and Republican voting in the state of North Dakota presumes that such a spatial understanding of political choices tells us something significant about the relationship between location and political behavior. To look at a Willa Cather novel from the perspective of Red Cloud presumes that in some ways Cather carried her Nebraska

*Roger B. Stein is professor of art history and English at State University of New York-Binghamton. He has published many studies on art and regionalism, including *Seascape and the American Imagination* (1975) and *Susquehanna: Images of the Settled Landscape* (1981).*

[GPQ 5 (Winter 1985): 5-23.]

childhood and youth with her during her adult years as a creator of fiction in New York and the East. Furthermore, the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle of the physicist applies as well to the art historian: the observer's questions necessarily color the results of our data-gathering. The inductive process is shaped by our hypotheses, the questions that seem presently meaningful to us.

These elementary but often overlooked principles are essential to an appreciation of the role of the visual arts in the understanding of a regional culture. Simply put, a regional art is an attempt to be space- and perhaps time-specific about a particular area, to report to the world the contours and character of a limited geographical district. Both the artists who create these images and the critic-historians of this process posit the value of the local above or at least on a par with the national or the universal. The seeming obviousness of this formulation masks the fact that it is a relatively new one. As a mode of social interpretation, regionalism is a late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century phenomenon. The presumption that the Great Plains and other "sections" have influenced our national development as distinctive geographical and cultural spaces, the fractionalization of a monolithic "American" experience into regional components, and a concomitant redefinition of our relation to a parent Europe by relocating "American" qualities in terms of western or midwestern experience—these are processes that we associate especially with the writings of Frederick Jackson Turner and his intellectual followers from the 1890s on.²

The questioning of the process of national self-definition and of our relation to Europe through a regional approach has come even later in American art history; in fact, there is no such historiography of the field at present. In its earlier years, American art history was excessively defensive, tied to notions of the great tradition of art that is European (and especially in the modern period, Italian and French), by which standards American art seems derivative and frequently "second-rate." The history of American art has been written too exclusively

in terms of the artists and institutions of the Northeast Atlantic seaboard (and usually by art historians trained and/or located in eastern institutions).

Recent efforts to look at the art of regions other than the Northeast—efforts, for example, to define nineteenth-century American landscape painting not primarily in terms of the "Hudson River School"—have both broadened the canon of artists and works to be considered and refocused the role of place as a defining criterion, with exciting consequences for the conceptualization of the field. New spaces and people—the settled landscape of the Susquehanna vs. the wild reaches of the Catskills or Adirondacks, the South vs. the North, Grand Rapids vs. New York City as art centers, the Great Lakes or the Mississippi River or the Great Plains vs. the Atlantic or the coastal mountain ranges—have opened our field of inquiry, and these new materials have stretched our aesthetic categories and led us to question the domination of some of our existing paradigms.³ The regional inquiry and vision have in this way partially recast our view of "American" art, helping us to understand that it is not a monolithic body of work with only individual or stylistic variations but a responsive instrument for sorting out and understanding what is shared, what is special to a place and time, and how and why these are related.

Historically, in terms of the theoretical justification of the purposes of art, a regional approach to art has challenged—more or less—the neoclassical ideals of, say, Joshua Reynolds, first president of the British Royal Academy, that it is the task of art to aspire toward the depiction of "general nature," which is universally shared by humankind and which links the present to its Western European classical and Christian ideals and origins.⁴ The "more or less" is important: the relation between the universal and the local or regional has always been problematic. The hierarchy of style adumbrated by Reynolds always recognized that the "lower" forms of art—genre, the frequently narrative art of the everyday; landscape, the art of specific places; portraiture; and still life—played a

role in the training of the eye of the artist and the education of the viewer toward the higher reaches of the imagination, the aspirations toward "the Ideal." And despite the appeal to general ideals of the Beautiful, the Sublime and the Picturesque, reified categories of aesthetic experience that were intended to be a language that spoke across time and space distinctions, clearly there also existed in the eighteenth century a contrasting tendency to gather data, visual and verbal, from travel accounts and scientific expeditions about the oddities of nature and the idiosyncracies of obscure places (including America) to fill the old "Cabinet of Curiosities."⁵ The Romantic Revolution, for its part, gave added credence, both politically and aesthetically, to the validity of local seeking and to the enhanced importance of the particular and the ordinary.

THE WORK OF ART AS COMMUNICATIVE ACT

The regional artist and the audience for regional art thus make connections with each other across a changing intellectual terrain. While the regional artist may strive for fidelity to his or her local space—in mapping the contours of a particular landscape, in working up the details of costume and history, and not the least in trying to give the viewer the *feel* of a place and time—the regional artist also frequently reaches for audiences who live beyond that local space and seeks to engage them by appealing to more generally shared ideas and ideals that cut against the potential estrangement of viewer from visual recorder, of consumer of images from producer. One may think of regional art, thus, as a kind of complex epistemological game in which the artist instructs the viewer how to know a strange world, both in terms of its space and its human inhabitants, by making that New World visually "habitable" to an audience that lives and/or sees in terms of the Old World and its traditions.⁶ The regional artist gives his or her audience clues, familiar signposts, by which to apprehend the unfamiliar.

To take European influence on the arts of the Great Plains as an example, there are, on the one hand, those artists who have sought to depict the radical newness and differentness of the Great Plains in visual forms that deny the inherited artistic traditions. On the other, there are those who portray the region with a Claude Lorrain classical landscape barely disguised with a few sagebrush; with a prairie schooner as movable creche with madonna and child; or with Mandans as Apollo Belvidere statues. For most artists, the process of accommodating the new to older ways of seeing and knowing, of adjusting new perceptions to older conceptions, and of shaping new materials within older acceptable formal patterns is a complex and reciprocal process, by no means a one-way street.

Because aesthetic experience comes to us thus packaged, we need to see the communicative act of regional art epistemologically not as a neutral transmission of images of a space and a time but as an attempt to balance the impulse toward precise reportorial rendering of the local and present against the contrasting, if not contradictory, impulse to locate the regional moment within its larger context in space and time, in history and tradition. Regional art is in this sense an active strategy of the artistic consciousness to refashion and give shape and structure to the data of local seeing in a way that will communicate with an audience of viewers who live mostly beyond the local aesthetic field and whose premises about life and art are not controlled by their experience of the particular geographical area.⁷

In tracing this process we must also recognize that a work of art is not an automatic matching of the world "out there" but the result of making a series of choices about what subjects to depict and how to depict them. Because the aesthetics of regional art have historically been linked with fidelity to place, "realism," or "local color," we might overlook the selective process involved: which aspects of the landscape and people have been chosen for presentation in art, and which have not; which have been distorted, ignored, or turned away

from—and why? We must not assume the inevitability of the works we know and have to study. The point is simple, but I think important: in our reconstruction of the epistemological process of regional art, we need to be aware of the selective process involved and of the roads not taken, for it may be, as Robert Frost reminds us, that “that has made all the difference.”

THE ROLE OF IDEOLOGY

Regional art is more than a presentation of inert and passive factual data in a second and equally important sense, for visual formations are packaged not only epistemologically but ideologically. Not only in what they report but in the ways in which they do so, they are ideological constructs that are part of the normative patterning of beliefs, ideas, and feelings that articulate relationships of power and notions of value in any given time and place. They communicate—again, more or less—how we “ought” to think and feel about that place and that people “out there” and ultimately about ourselves as social beings.⁸ The separation of art from life, the isolation of the artist as a special type and of the experience of “high art” from the lives of ordinary people in the last 150 years, has at once both elevated art and trivialized the relation between art and society, convincing many of its irrelevance. The specialization of art history and appreciation as a separate discipline has, however unwittingly, contributed to this trend by reinforcing Reynolds’s hierarchical categories; by furthering the separation of high art forms like painting, sculpture, and architecture from the popular print, the town view, the poster, the parade and rodeo, the gas station and the MacDonald playground; and by sometimes separating formal values from their social meaning.

How art conveys social meaning—the “more or less”—is always a complex process, sometimes explicit (look at a dollar bill) but more often implicit, mediated, and embedded in the viewer’s associations with the image or iconography or in the structure of the work, the way

it presents itself to its audience of viewers. We need posit no conspiratorial theories to understand that, like all aesthetic formations, works of art shape our beliefs, ask us by the way they communicate (we may call these “aesthetic strategies”) to share some ideas, usually the dominant beliefs of the culture. In this sense too they are active participants in cultural process, constitutive shapes of culture rather than after-the-fact “illustrations” of some reified notion of the culture. Whether as unique formations (like oil paintings) or multiples (like engravings or lithographs), they participate as individual statements within a larger social discourse, and as a part of our analysis we need to ask of them: Whose needs do they serve, and how do they serve them? Why and in what form do these regional artists give their area to the world, and what do those audiences do with the “information” thus packaged? How does it shape social meaning for them, and for us?

THE QUESTION OF INFLUENCE

To focus on both the epistemological process and the ideological function of works of art helps us to redefine the question of influence and to consider specifically the influence of Europe on the visual art of the Great Plains. The student of American and regional culture knows that measuring the impact of “Europe”—what we have borrowed, what we create anew, how and in what ways we have accepted, rejected, or modified both the content and the form of our parent culture—has been a continuing question, one that is always ideologically loaded, and frequently a self-conscious process, from the first pronouncements of John Winthrop aboard the *Arbella* to the latest rhetoric of the most recent presidential campaign. It involves our efforts at self-definition as a people nationally, and as travelers to or inhabitants of and spokespersons for a particular region.

Historians of art have looked at the question of influence in a variety of ways. The biography of the artist-maker—his or her training, and how the artist used past models in order to tell a story, to define values, or to construct a visual

formation—offers significant clues as to how European materials and formal solutions to artistic problems are borrowed and adapted to the regional artist's particular needs. Patronage, or the impact of a European market for artistic production, offers another fruitful avenue of investigation, as do questions of the transmission of ideas (such as the "Noble Savage") through art, and the translation of European materials into new forms (paintings into graphics, poetic ideas into visual images). By recognizing the visual artifact as a communicative act, an epistemological process, we will avoid the danger of static notions of influence, with "source-hunting" as a series of mechanical or linear causal links or as the accumulation of visual parallels or formal affinities that fail to address the essential question of how and why a European source achieves its new meaning in the New World. Merely to point to the re-use of a theme, a motif, or a form-solution (a way of putting together a picture or a building) runs the risk of decontextualizing, of missing the work of art's historical embeddedness in its culture, its place, and its time. We must recognize that mapping the complex interchange between Europe and America is not a simple matter, however; we need to preserve a sense of the dialectic as we seek our particular answers.⁹

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: THE POLITICS OF SPACE

In order to test these general models for understanding how the work of art functions as a means of knowing, as a form of visual ideology that shapes social meaning, and as a complex transmitter between Europe and America, let us now turn to the Great Plains as a laboratory and explore some of the particular implications of these premises for Great Plains art. (Any one of my examples deserves fuller explication and documentation that can only be suggested here.) In the nineteenth century, the first and foremost task of the art of the region was to confront

the great experience of western space, its Native American inhabitants, and those Caucasians who intruded upon, colonized, and conquered that space. To put the issue thus is admittedly loaded—it takes a stand—but then, so do terms like "pioneers" or "settlers" (an implicit judgment about how one should interact with the land, which many Native Americans would have denied) or "Manifest Destiny" or "the March of Civilization" or "Westward the Course of Empire." The point is not merely that our language is political, but that space itself is political, and the response toward western space was always and inevitably politically saturated. As a social fact, that should be obvious enough to those concerned with land acquisition; with governmental policy at the local, state, regional, or national level; with water rights and mining and resource management; and with building codes and regional planning. My point is that the political configuration of space is equally evident in the visual arts, though the forms in which it is expressed are inevitably different from those in other kinds of social discourse, and we need to attend, as I have been suggesting, to both the content and the form of this discourse.

When James Fenimore Cooper sent the outlaw family of Ishmael Bush out to the plains in the opening chapter of *The Prairie* (1827) to escape the law and the restrictions of eastern civilization (and with the captive "European" Inez as a hostage from that world), he and his characters must confront the incredible openness of the space. Later in the book, the space is peopled with the clashing forces of tribes of "Dacotahs" and "Pawnee Loups," but initially the Bush caravan must confront the figure of the lone trapper Natty Bumppo.¹⁰ James Hamilton's 1861 illustration of the scene (fig. 1) portrays this graphically in an image that dwarfs the human group and sets Natty starkly against the sunset sky, the tonal values of the engraving suggesting the endless undulations of western space.¹¹ Graphic space is organized to dramatize the relation of the human intruders to the lone trapper, a giant in the earth, almost deified by the surrounding halo of light. The illustration



FIG. 1. G. H. Cushman, engraver, after James Hamilton, "Appearance of the Trapper to the Emigrants, Prairie, Chapter I," in Susan Fenimore Cooper, *Pages and Pictures from the Writings of James Fenimore Cooper* (New York: W. A. Townsend, 1861); steel engraving, $3\frac{5}{8} \times 5\frac{9}{16}$ inches. Photo: Christopher Focht.

is Hamilton's interpretation of Cooper's values; through the allocation of pictorial space, the artist translates complex social relationships into relationships with the landscape and sky.

Cooper's novel was followed in 1833 by William Cullen Bryant's poem "The Prairies," a response to his trip of the previous year to Illinois, a space as western and distant to Bryant as the imagined prairie of Nebraska had been to Cooper. Here the lone figure has become the voice of the poet, summoning up images that not only describe or report on his visual experience; they offer us insights into how the eye accommodates western space and makes its great openness habitable to human consciousness:

These are the gardens of the Desert, these
The unshorn fields, boundless and beautiful,
For which the speech of England has
no name—
The Prairies.¹²

Already in the opening lines, in the very process of naming, Bryant makes a nationalistic point (not-England) but links the grasslands to France ("Prairie"); he has identified the "unshorn fields" with both the sublime ("boundless") and the beautiful, framing his perception within those well-recognized aesthetic categories; and he defines the space typologically in terms of the biblically loaded "Garden of the Desert" label, an available descriptive and normative strategy for signifying the West as a virgin land.¹³

Bryant makes the epistemological process, the act of individual perception itself, explicitly the subject in the following lines, reading both inward and outward for visual images of space that can figure the process:

I behold them for the first,
And my heart swells, while the dilated sight
Takes in the encircling vastness. Lo!
they stretch,
In airy undulations, far away,
As if the ocean, in his gentlest swell,
Stood still, with all his rounded
billows fixed,
And motionless forever.—Motionless?—
No—they are all unchained again, . . .

and Bryant is off and running. From the already classic prairie-as-sea that evokes in the viewer a familiar image to help locate the unfamiliar prairies, Bryant goes on to heap up a succession of images as a kind of history of the space and its people.¹⁴ Filling the oxymoronic “verdant waste” for his own consciousness and that of his audience with recognizable images of landscape and animals, he conjures up the mound builders (as American equivalents of the Greeks), the “red man,” the bison, the tragedy of warfare, the Golden Age in nature, and then the sound of the new Caucasian immigration, until his meditation suddenly stops:

All at once
A fresher wind sweeps by, and breaks
my dream,
And I am in the wilderness alone.

Bryant’s “The Prairies” is worth dwelling on because it is a classic early literary formulation of the epistemological process through which art reaches its national and international audience. By breaking down the alienation experienced before the new space of the West through known visual paradigms for aesthetic, historical, and social meaning, the poem links the region to the nation and to the European world, and ties the present to the past. The poetic observer balances between the appropriation of that

space—imaginatively colonizing it, spatially filling it up—and a recognition of the otherness of the space and of the self alone, like Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, against the big sky. Verbally this process would be recapitulated in the years to come in a multitude of variations.¹⁵

PEOPLING THE SPACE: NATIVE AMERICANS

Three years before the publication of Bryant’s poem, George Catlin set out on the first of his pictorial journeys to the West. Catlin’s work is well known to students of the region. The more than six hundred works he produced between 1830 and 1848 are an important record of Native American tribes, their habits and customs, their space, and most especially, in an extraordinary series of portraits, the dress, costume, and physiognomy of individuals among the many tribes he encountered. The ethnographic value of these images, especially when coupled with Catlin’s written records of his travels, is beyond question.

For our purposes here, they need to be seen not merely as data but as an alternative response to the region. Where Bryant turns the openness into an opportunity for lone meditation, reconstructing the space historically in a sequence of prior cultures to insist to his audience both on the inevitable course of empires rising and falling and on the value of the lone self, Catlin’s is a raw confrontation with the newness of the space and the specialness of its inhabitants. If he shares with Bryant a sense that they are a “disappearing race,” his response is not to distance himself but to record them as a social phenomenon and to capture the contours of the land and the people as precisely as his pencil and brush will permit—yet without visually confronting how or why they would “disappear.” And if his Indian sitters had some apprehension that this magician might have come to steal their selves in the act of picture-making, ultimately they were not mistaken; for despite his sensitivity to their culture, he was in fact appropriating their culture to make it available, as Bryant did, to others beyond the West. Both the communicative act and the

politics of space of Catlin's art become apparent not in the individual images but in the Catlin Indian Gallery, shown first in the East and in 1840 and thereafter in London, Paris, and elsewhere; in his organization of the 507 paintings and objects lining the walls of the Egyptian Hall, Picadilly, or the galleries of the Palace of Versailles; and in the ways in which his art thus displayed met the needs of European audiences of consumers.

The work of art thus becomes part of a complex social discourse in which subject matter is shaped and organized to meet the ideological needs of its audience. Catlin the artist and Catlin the ethnographer become Catlin the marketer of this composite image of the Native American to a Europe whose idea of the Noble Savage had given original shape to the artist's quest. Although Catlin's work turns the generalized and idealized French notions of the Noble Savage into a series of particular and precisely rendered images of the "reality" of the western tribes, still the success of the Catlin Gallery as a communicative act lies in his reinforcement of his audiences' ideological premises about those purer Rousseauian selves untainted by civilization. The process of seeing, the transmission of ideology, and the influence of Europe become parts of a complex cultural interchange.¹⁶

STRATEGIES OF PICTORIAL FORM

The same can be said for many individual pictures of Native Americans by others, which communicate a particular ideological stance through their spatial arrangement. As white settlements encroached more and more upon Indian lands, Seth Eastman and John Mix Stanley followed Catlin's lead to bring images of the western tribes back to the East. Stanley's *Last of their Race* (1857) (fig. 2) makes the Native Americans' loss of their land a matter of quiet nostalgia. The stability, in formal pictorial terms, of the classical pyramidal arrangement emphasizing family values, with the men at the peak, the women and children at the base; the beautiful balance of the dark travelers

beneath the mountain from whence they have all come and the lovely openness of the sunset sea beyond; the homage of the kneeling figure, like a vassal to his lord—all allow us to experience the grandeur of the moment without asking why. The conflict between races has pushed the Native Americans off their land to the edge of space and time. Eternity, symbolized by the sunset, is their last refuge, a spiritual substitute for some social resolution. Yet the sense of cultural and racial conflict is masked by the beautiful balance of the composition.

In Albert Bierstadt's *Wolf River, Kansas* (fig. 3), a product of his first 1859 trip to the West, the devices of European classical pictorial composition again make Native Americans available to the viewer, the Caucasian consumer of the western image in an eastern market. The viewer's position is on the near side of the river. Through a zigzag of diagonals, the dead tree and the path up the opposite bank, we can move with the white horsemen into a tribal space carefully enclosed by balanced foliage to the left and right. These compositional devices give us easy entry into that space as the inhabitants wait expectantly for us. All sense of intrusion or threat is eliminated. The women in the middle ground center do not block our pathway; they are moments in our journey from darkness to the light that gleams beyond.¹⁷

Bierstadt achieved great popularity in the 1860s and '70s through his depiction of western space, frequently punctuated with Native Americans perched in the foreground as observers of the scene. (This old pictorial device, called "staffage," establishes a human point of view and a sense of scale.) In some works they stand in groups in the middle ground as diminutive transients in the immense space of the western plains and mountains. In both cases these pictorial devices serve an ideological function: by identifying the viewer with the Indian observer, the picture presumes a shared experience of seeing; by shrinking them in size the artist makes them a "removable" element. The Native American's point of view is appropriated by the Caucasian artist and his audience.



FIG. 2. *John Mix Stanley, Last of their Race (1857); oil on canvas, 43 x 60 inches.* Courtesy of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming.

In one of his most famous paintings, the 1888 *Last of the Buffalo* (fig. 4), which Bierstadt submitted for inclusion in the Paris Exposition of the following year, conflict is the subject.¹⁸ The decimation of the herds of buffalo suggested by the scattered skulls and carcasses of the foreground is the central image in the lone confrontation of mounted Indian and charging bull, framed by the galloping braves to the near right and the quiet beauty of the distant mountains to the distant left, neatly balanced. In the pictorial tradition, the painting recalls the great lion hunts of Rubens of the seventeenth century; the eighteenth-century pictures of struggles between lions and horses by George Stubbs; or John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark* (1778)—all dramatic encounters between the avatars of wild and savage nature and the human will to order and control.¹⁹

Bierstadt's success within this pictorial tradition, adapted and "regionalized" to the grand space of the western plains, as well as his success with his American audience, lies precisely in the way he has generalized the struggle to "man vs. beast" and in the process implicitly placed the responsibility for the decimation of the herds of bison upon the Native Americans, rather than the white American and European sportsmen-slaughterers and commercial exploiters who in fact were the culprits.²⁰ In constructing his painting within the conventional pictorial patterns of the European tradition and arranging his regional content within an inherited orderly system of forms, Bierstadt in this painting "naturalized" American liberal ideology, suppressing social conflict. His pictorial strategies mask the racial conflict, the land-grabbing, the buffalo-slaughtering, and the responsibility for genocide that are implicit



FIG. 3. *Albert Bierstadt, The Wolf River, Kansas (c. 1859); oil on canvas, 48 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 38 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches. Courtesy of the Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase, Dexter M. Ferry, Jr. Fund.*



FIG. 4. *Albert Bierstadt, The Last of the Buffalo (1888); oil on canvas, 71¼ x 119¼ inches.* In the collection of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, gift of Mrs. Albert Bierstadt.

or latent in these scenes and their aftermath. My language here is admittedly strong, and it does not apply in this extreme formulation to all pictures and all situations, to be sure. But I wish to highlight the methodological issue: that regional art, like all art, is an ideological construct, and that the function of ideology is precisely to suppress relationships of power and thus to make us feel that what is offered to us in the artifact is “natural,” what “everybody” believes, and not a subject for debate, struggle, or conflict.

That social struggle was a central issue of the decade when this picture was created and exhibited in Paris is obvious to any student of the period. Racial, ethnic, and class conflict was a dominant theme: The great strikes of McCormick Harvester and the Haymarket “riot” in Chicago in 1886 and the Homestead and Coeur d’Alene strikes of 1892 are well known. The Dawes Allotment Act of 1887 divided up reservation lands and took away more than three-fourths of the remaining

Indian lands. The 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee followed the Ghost Dance of the Sioux, which had promised the return of the almost extinct buffalo and the disappearance of the white race.

For the most part, the visual art of the Great Plains turned the racial conflict into ideologically acceptable forms that could be marketed in the East and abroad. The best known of these efforts, of course, was the Wild West Show of Buffalo Bill, which opened in Omaha in 1883 and went on the first of its many European tours in 1887, two years before Bierstadt’s painting was shown in Paris. This is not the place to rehearse that complex interchange between American and European culture, an extraordinary dramatic and artistic rendering of the Great Plains for an international audience, but we may select from this rich body of material one stunning poster image that summarizes the issues we have been discussing (fig. 5).²¹ By contrast to the grandiose Bierstadt canvas for a major international



FIG. 5. Napoleon, Bonheur, & Buffalo Bill (1898); colored lithographic poster, 26 1/2 x 39 inches; Courier Lithograph Company, Buffalo, New York. Courtesy of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming.

exhibition, we are dealing here with a small, popular, lithographic art form, produced in quantity. As a communicative act, the poster surely reached a wide audience for whom the visual arts were by no means restricted to the paintings that have become the primary objects of investigation by historians of art. The student of regional culture needs to spread a wider net to catch the full range of aesthetic expressiveness. But on the other hand, we also need to recognize that a poster is an aesthetic formation; it packages information—visual and verbal—in a particular way, and the formal organization matters.

The Buffalo Bill poster organizes its information in a neatly balanced pattern, juxtaposing the American and European white male heroes, on their white steeds, with the French woman artist turned toward her American subject. It is true, as the allegorized middle caption tells

us, that “art perpetuating fame” commemorates Rosa Bonheur’s painting Cody’s portrait in 1889, as she had earlier copied Catlin’s images.²² Bonheur had a long-standing interest in the *peau rouges*, and her work as a major painter of animals wild and tamed made the Buffalo Bill extravaganza naturally attractive to her. She was also an Americanophile, in part because as a feminist she saw hope in the American women’s movement.²³

However, the poster image of 1898 says at once less and more than this. Published at the time of the Spanish-American War, it is implicitly an image of the triumph of American imperialism in its most attractive cultural form. The formal balance of the picture establishes an equivalence between French and American expansionism, but the dour look of the paunchy Napoleon and his abandoned cannon in the grass contrast to the alert and proud western

American to whom the challenge of empire has been passed on—again, here in its most acceptable, playful form—and Bonheur is recast as the subservient female recorder of American male greatness. To bring thus to the surface the latent ideological significance of the image is to make explicit what functions effectively precisely because it is *not* said; the deeper social implications remain masked and implicit, not a subject for debate, but demanding the viewers' assent.

INFLUENCE IN SOCIAL CONTEXT

We need finally to think about how influence works over time and to recognize the shifting and changing character of influence as it is reshaped by American circumstances. One case in point may at least suggest the direction that such influence studies might take. The paintings of the so-called Barbizon School, a group of landscape and rural figure painters including Camille Corot, Jean-François Millet and others who were working in that rural area near Paris from the 1820s to the '50s, had a powerful impact in the United States. In the 1850s and thereafter the work of these Frenchmen was well received and found willing purchasers in the United States, perhaps more than at home, thanks in part to the promotional efforts of the socially well-connected American painter William Morris Hunt. Hunt had studied with Millet, and in 1853 he had purchased, among other works, one version of Millet's *The Sower* (fig. 6). In the generalized images of rurality they saw in the Barbizon paintings, the American painters had found congenial both the freedom of technique in the looser brushwork and the freedom from loyalties to the specifically American landscape. Even the truculently independent Winslow Homer borrowed the motif and placement of the single figure against the sky, at first rather imitatively during and after his trip to France in 1867, and then more creatively in the years after 1880 on the North Sea coast of England and on the Maine coast, where his borrowing of motifs and form-solutions is linked to a more profound understanding of

the potentially hostile relations between nature and humankind—especially women.²⁴

Therein lies the key question of influence, beyond biographical links of artists and patrons and adoption of forms and motifs: how to explain the impact of Barbizon in America as a part of the larger social discourse of nineteenth-century culture. Recent scholarship on the social history of French nineteenth-century art has helped us to see the complex position of this group of artists and to learn to read the complex signification of their visual formations: how and why these rural images functioned within the political, religious, and class conflicts of 1848 Revolutionary France and thereafter.²⁵ The influence question for students of American culture is to understand how the work functioned and how American patronage of Barbizon and Barbizon-inspired American work recast its meaning to meet the very different ideological needs of post-Civil War America.

People continued to buy Barbizon paintings, first in eastern centers like Boston and New York and then in midwestern and western art centers, and patronage extended well into the twentieth century. Barbizon-type painting formed the basis of the major collections and exhibitions, for example, in Seattle in the first quarter of the twentieth century, long after it had been declared "old-fashioned" in the East. Admiration for Barbizon was a response of collectors and the larger audience in a booming urban metropolis who wished to be in touch with their simpler rural roots.²⁶ Perhaps the outstanding example of the later story of the influence of Millet and Barbizon is the monumental statue of *The Sower* that was erected on top of the four-hundred-foot tower of the new Nebraska State Capitol in Lincoln in the early 1930s (fig. 7).

The persistence of such an image in a radically transformed social environment cries for explanation. For Winslow Homer, Millet's toiling rural workers become images of women's endurance in fishing communities, as they do in the literary images of Sarah Orne Jewett. Hamlin Garland's fiction similarly shows



FIG. 6. *Jean-François Millet, The Sower (1850); oil on canvas, 40 x 32 1/2 inches.* Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, gift of Quincy Adams Shaw through Quincy A. Shaw, Jr., and Mrs. Marion Shaw Haughton.



FIG. 7. *State Capitol, Lincoln, Nebraska (1978).* Nebraska Game and Parks Commission photo.

midwestern rural people struggling against poverty of the soil and the soul. The American debate surrounding the 1899 publication of Edwin Markham's poem, "The Man with a Hoe," based upon Millet's figure of a brutalized rural worker, suggests another part of the story. With this poem, Millet's painting of 1860-62 was accommodated to the dominant ideology of another time and place, entering the national discourse in America on the significance of rural labor that was, in varying degrees, nostalgia for a lost pastoral world, a religious quest, a recollection of black slavery, and an expression of political radicalism. (Markham himself, when attacked for emphasizing the brutalizing effect of work upon the laborer, finally identified the image with the oppression of an *urban* working class.)²⁷

But what needs did the nineteen-foot statue of *The Sower* atop the Nebraska State Capitol serve in the Depression years? Removed from its French context and established as a part of the visual and literary discourse in an American farm state where sowing was done on a massive scale by machines that had necessitated a capitalization of agriculture that brought farmers to the brink of economic collapse during the Depression, the statue was surely, as image, not a "reflection" of contemporary farm experience (especially atop that art deco skyscraper tower) as much as it was a nostalgic echo of a rural past and a quasi-religious vision of the marriage of art, man, and the sky. In a 1978 brochure the image appears framed above by the fluttering red, white, and blue: Millet's *Sower* Americanized and securely relocated as an emblem of hope that is regional and national, aesthetic and social. The angle of the camera's eye, the way in which we come to apprehend the photographic image, still makes a difference. The photograph thus becomes one more in that sequence of aesthetic formations that shape social meaning.

The foregoing examples suggest a few of the various ways in which we might assess the influence of Europe upon the visual art of the Great Plains. I have urged that we see the work of art as a communicative act that participates

in a complex interchange whose meanings are multivalent, depending as they do upon both artist and audience—upon the circumstances that determine the production of the image and the needs of the receiving body of consumers. Both are shaped by the mode of communication, the epistemological process, and the ideological assumptions of artist and audience that are embedded not only in the ideas and images and motifs themselves but also in the form, the ways in which an image is constructed, presented, and apprehended by its various audiences over time. I have concluded with a particular problem of the influence of Europe on the visual arts of the Great Plains because the final impression I wish to leave, in these methodological reflections, is that we must approach questions very much in particular. If the issues, as I have addressed them, cut across the field, the answers certainly do not come as a series of generalizations or reified notions of some monolithic "American Culture" or some linear stylistic history of art, but rather as a series of particular clarifications of the aesthetic impulse. These clarifications illuminate the dynamic processes of history, as we attempt to unravel that complex web of culture that artists and their audiences weave around the individual work of art.

NOTES

1. My work on regional culture includes *Seascape and the American Imagination* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art/Clarkson N. Potter, 1975) and *Susquehanna: Images of the Settled Landscape* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Roberson Center for the Arts and Sciences, 1981). For my earlier thinking on the question of influence, see especially the preface to my *John Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America, 1840-1900* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967).

2. See Henry D. Shapiro, "The Place of Culture and the Problem of Identity," in Allan Batteau, ed., *Appalachia and America: Autonomy and Regional Dependence* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), pp. 114-41, which contextualizes the history of regionalism

in American thought and perceptively locates Turner and the Turner literature within this context.

3. As examples of a few of the most recent efforts in the field, see Rena M. Coen, *Painting and Sculpture in Minnesota, 1820-1914* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976); "The River: Images of the Mississippi," *Design Quarterly*, nos. 101 and 102 (1976); William C. Lipke and Philip Grimes, eds., *Vermont Landscape Images, 1776-1976* (Burlington: Robert Hull Fleming Museum, University of Vermont, 1976); Donald Keyes et al., *The White Mountains: Place and Perception* (Durham: University Art Galleries, University of New Hampshire, 1980); John B. Jackson, *The Southern Landscape Tradition in Texas* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1980); Ella-Prince Knox et al., *Painting in the South: 1564-1980* (Richmond: Virginia Museum, 1983); J. Gray Sweeney, *Artists of Grand Rapids, 1840-1900* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Art Museum and Public Museum, 1981) and Sweeney, *Great Lakes Marine Painting of the Nineteenth Century* (Muskegon, Mich.: Museum of Art, 1983); Stein, *Susquehanna*; Martha J. Hoppin et al., *Arcadian Vales: Views of the Connecticut River Valley* (Springfield, Mass.: Library and Museum Association, 1981).

4. See Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert R. Wark (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1959), and Lawrence Lipking, *The Ordering of the Arts in 18th-Century England* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970).

5. See Barbara Stafford, *Voyage into Substance: Art, Science, Nature, and the Illustrated Travel Account, 1760-1840* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984); Walter J. Hipple, *The Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetic Theory* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1957).

6. Geographers have long been familiar with this notion; see David Lowenthal's classic formulation, "Geography, Experience, and Imagination: Towards a Geographical Epistemology," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 51 (September 1961): 241-60.

7. For a dramatic case in point of the difficulty of seeing and recording what is "out there" and the tendency to cast the new in

existing conceptual molds, see Wallace Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Sentry Edition, 1954), pp. 174-91 and passim, and Stein, *Ruskin*, pp. 168-85.

8. For a cogent presentation of the issues of art as ideology and a good guide to the impressive, if often conflicting, literature on the subject, see Janet Wolff, *The Social Production of Art* (London: Macmillan, 1981), pp. 49-70.

9. For a philosophical approach to the question, emphasizing logical issues, see Göran Hermerén, *Influence in Art and Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975).

10. Cooper had not, of course, been to the Great Plains. His sense of the landscape of the region was derived from travelers' accounts, most notably Lewis and Clark's and the narrative of the Long Expedition compiled by Edwin James. See Henry Nash Smith's introduction to the Rinehart Edition of *The Prairie* (New York: 1950), p. vii. As D. H. Lawrence emphasized in his *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1922), Cooper finished the book in Paris.

11. The engraving was published in Susan Fenimore Cooper, *Pages and Pictures from the Writings of James Fenimore Cooper* (New York: W. A. Townsend, 1861), opposite p. 144.

12. I cite the Roslyn edition of *The Poetical Works of William Cullen Bryant* (New York: D. Appleton, 1903), pp. 130-33.

13. See Henry Nash Smith's classic *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950). For the role of typology, Ursula Brumm's *American Thought and Religious Typology* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1970) is a starting place; the literature on the subject has grown substantially in recent years, as seen in the work of Sacvan Bercovitch, Mason Lowance, and others.

14. The region was an inland sea in the geological past, though how much Bryant and others who used this analogy knew or cared about that is an open question.

15. For example, when E. L. Burlingame wrote the chapter on "The Plains and the Sierras" for the 1874 volume of Appleton and Company's lavish parlor book, *Picturesque*

America, edited (if only in name) by the aged Bryant, he also groped for sea metaphors to define the space of the plains. For Burlingame the new land begins in Nebraska. From the railroad station at Omaha, "one feels a little of the old-time pioneering feeling, as he seems to cut the chain that binds him to Eastern life and is wheeled out upon the great grassy sea he has looked at wonderingly from the Omaha hills" (p. 172). (His sense of wonder is like that of the midwestern Nick Carraway at the end of *The Great Gatsby*.) The illustrations for the Burlingame essay by Thomas Moran and F. O. C. Darley offer alternative versions of how the space is to be filled up or left empty.

16. William F. Truettner addresses some of these issues in *The Natural Man Observed: A Study of Catlin's Indian Gallery* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979).

17. Cf. a similar pattern of easy entry in Bierstadt's *Indian Encampment, Shoshone Village* (1860), reproduced in color opposite *Wolf River* in Gordon Hendricks, *Albert Bierstadt: Painter of the American West* (New York: Harry N. Abrams/ Amon Carter Museum, 1973), pl. 63-65.

18. *The Last of the Buffalo* was rejected by the American selection committee as stylistically old-fashioned, but Bierstadt's international popularity, coupled with his rights as a Paris Medallist of the French Academy, led nevertheless to the inclusion of the huge 6' x 10' canvas (Hendricks, *Bierstadt*, pp. 284-91).

19. The American tradition of hunt pictures is discussed by Rena M. Coen in "The Last of the Buffalo," *American Art Journal* 5 (November 1973): 83-94.

20. This point is also made by Matthew Baigell in his *Albert Bierstadt* (New York: Watson Guptill, 1981); he speaks of the painting as a "diversion—two minority groups, as it were, contending with each other. . . . a white-wash of history of the sort that became popular late in the century, especially in the works of artists such as Frederic Remington" (p. 64). On the project to etch *The Last of the Buffalo*, see Hendricks, *Bierstadt*, p. 284; an 1891 photogravure of this work exists.

21. See the excellent exhibition catalogue, *Buffalo Bill and the Wild West* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981).

22. The poster is a visual and verbal emblem within a tradition that stretches back to the Renaissance; for its American usages, see my "Charles Willson Peale's Expressive Design: The Artist in His Museum," *Prospects* 6 (1981), esp. pp. 140-53, and the forthcoming "Thomas Smith's Self-Portrait: Image/Text as Artifact," *Art Journal* 45 (Spring 1985).

23. See Dore Ashton and Denise Browne Hare, *Rosa Bonheur: A Life and a Legend* (New York: Viking, 1981), pp. 144-57 and passim. The image of Bonheur in the poster is taken from a well-known photograph of her.

24. For the story of the American followers of Barbizon, see Peter Bermingham's illuminating *American Art in the Barbizon Mood* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press for National Collection of Fine Arts, 1975); for Winslow Homer, see his *Girl With a Pitchfork* (1867), *ibid.*, p. 146; his derivative version of *The Sower for Scribner's Magazine* of August 1878 is mentioned and reproduced in John Wilmerding, *Winslow Homer* (New York: Praeger, 1972), pp. 50, 76. Homer's later adaptation of Millet's format can be seen in such works as *Hark the Lark* (1882), in Wilmerding, *Homer*, p. 146.

25. See, especially for Millet, in some ways the most radical of the Barbizon group, Robert Herbert, *Jean-François Millet* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1976); Griselda Pollock, *Millet* (London: Oresko Books, 1977); and for the broader context, T. J. Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Public in France, 1848-1851* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973), esp. pp. 79-98, and the theoretical chapter, "On the Social History of Art," in Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the French Republic, 1848-1851* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1973), pp. 9-20.

26. This statement is based upon my own unpublished research for a paper delivered in Seattle in 1969 analyzing the bases of the collections of Horace C. Henry (the foundation of the University of Washington Art Gallery), the Charles Frye collection (the basis of the Charles and Emma Frye Art Museum in Seattle) and the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition held in Seattle in 1907. See also the subsequent work of Charlotte Stokes, "Patron and Patronage of the Arts: Seattle, 1851-1930," in *Henry*

Gallery/Five Decades (Seattle: Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, 1977), pp. 45-56, and Stokes's M.A. thesis, cited therein.

27. See Laura Meixner, "Popular Criticism of Jean-François Millet in Nineteenth-Century America," *Art Bulletin* 65 (March 1983): 94-105.