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Review of *The Real West* Commentary by Patricia Nelson Limerick

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The Real West. Commentary by Patricia Nelson Limerick. Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1996. Photographs, color plates. 96pp. \$12.95 paper.

In an exhibition and publishing collaboration, the Colorado Historical Society, the Denver Art Museum, and the Denver Public Library provide an absorbing visual and conceptual experience titled *The Real West*. Its strength is the manner in which the publishers have provided a novel visual statement through the color plates and photographs that comprise over 75 percent of the book.

The volume represents the effort of numerous individuals: Andrew E. Masich wrote the Introduction; Patricia Nelson Limerick authored the Commentary; Georgianna Contiguglia, Gwen F. Chanzit, and Eleanor Gehres collaborated on the Afterword. The text provides a frame of reference for the exhibition of artifacts, offering us a clear picture of the constructed reality of the West.

The 20,000 square foot display which opened at the three institutions on 30 March 1996 was the first major exhibition concerned with issues of the American West to be developed and presented in the West. Its 1700 objects were organized around icons viewers would easily recognize—a Cowboy, gold, a

windmill, a Main Street, the Rocky Mountains, a tipi, an adobe church, a Fort. The catalog describes how the icons were used to organize, code, and focus the exhibition.

The true test for most curators or developers of an exhibition is creating an accompanying catalog that provides an experience akin to that of the exhibit itself for individuals who never saw it. How can the original experience have a life outside gallery walls? The authors and publishers of *The Real West* attempt to solve that problem by providing readers with essays rich in revealing historical insight and with a selection of compelling juxtaposed works from the exhibition.

Expressive examples include the Diary of Lemuel Ford (plate 2), from the Denver Art Museum, opened to show a photograph of a campsite on the left page, with journal notes and a pressed leaf on the right. *The Dōna Sebastiana (Death Cart)*, Artist Unknown (plate 9), also from the Denver Art Museum, provides a powerful visual statement. In addition, the book offers unique juxtapositions that would not have been evident in the exhibition because of its three separate locations. One example is the Ute Indian hide dress (plate 11) from the Denver Art Museum which is placed next to a painting titled *Native Land* (plate 12) by Chuck Forsman on loan to the Denver Public Library. The contrasting messages suggested by each piece provide a forceful statement. A second example of this synergy is the spread consisting of *American Progress* (plate 19) by John Gast, loaned to the Denver Public Library by the Library of Congress, and *Attack on Sand Creek*, (plate 20) by Robert Lindneux, provided by the Colorado Historical Society.

By offering so many rich ideas and such stimulating imagery from the three participating institutions, *The Real West* leaves the reader with the urge to explore the region, its development, and the diverse cultures that formed its personality.

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