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Spring 1998

Review of *Plain Pictures: Images of the American Prairie* By Joni L. Kinsey

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Carpenter-Troccoli, Joan, "Review of *Plain Pictures: Images of the American Prairie* By Joni L. Kinsey" (1998). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2022.

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Plain Pictures: Images of the American Prairie. By Joni L. Kinsey. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, for the University of Iowa Museum of Art, 1996. Illustrations, maps, notes, selected bibliography, index. xx + 236 pp. \$65.00 cloth, \$34.95 paper.

In *Plain Pictures*, Joni Kinsey argues that the depiction of the Plains and prairies has been a matter of accommodation from the time that Euro-American artists first ventured into the West. The prairie's lack of trees, natural and man-made landmarks, and high places from which to view the landscape made it an almost impossible subject for early nineteenth-century painters. They introduced compositional elements and stylistic conventions into their prairie pictures to make them conform to generally accepted notions of beauty, even as they struggled to find pictorial forms appropriate to the Plains' undifferentiated spaces and low horizons. This process of adaptation extended to modifications in the actual landscape, as white settlers altered the prairies to

accord with their esthetic preferences as well as their economic needs.

Kinsey quotes copiously from nineteenth- and twentieth-century commentators on the prairies and Plains, most of whom described the region as a desolate wasteland or, conversely, a limitless garden promising spiritual freedom and infinite opportunity. Despite the frequent hyperbole of such statements, the seemingly contradictory positions they represent are not entirely unreasonable, given the dramatic difference between the arid lands west of the 100th meridian and the relatively well-watered eastern prairies.

These polarized attitudes affected the pictorial expression of generation after generation of artists, as Kinsey demonstrates in an impressive array of prairie pictures ranging from the 1830s to the present. She notes the merits of these paintings and has intelligent things to say about all of them. One gets the impression that in her view, however, most artists failed to capture the essential character of the prairies, compromised as they were by their adherence to aesthetic theory, the influence exerted by their patrons, and prevailing cultural attitudes.

Kinsey reserves her greatest enthusiasm for today's artists of the Plains, who have "begun to grasp the complexity of the prairie environment and appreciate the landscape in its purest form." Their paintings are indeed spectacular and may well represent contemporary American landscape art at its best, but they are just as much a reflection of the mood of the late twentieth century as Alfred Jacob Miller's pictures are of the values of the Romantic period.

One could argue with a few of Kinsey's interpretations and point out an error of fact or two, but such quibbles are eclipsed by the valuable contribution to American art history she has made here.

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