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Brian W. Dippie
University of Victoria-British Columbia

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REVIEW ESSAY

The American West: Out of Myth, Into Reality. By Peter H. Hassrick. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000. Illustrations, notes, further reading, index of artists. 176 pp. \$39.95.

Visions of the West: Art and Artifacts from the Private Collection of J. P. Bryan, Torch Energy Advisors Incorporated and Others. Edited by Melissa Baldrige, with an introduction by Patricia Nelson Limerick. Layton, UT: Gibbs-Smith Publisher, 1999. Photographs, illustrations, biographies, index. xvi + 320 pp. \$60.00.

WESTERN ART'S BIG TENT

Western art continues on its own distinctive path: disdained and ignored by art critics, especially in the East; beloved by a huge public, especially in the West. Western art museums display their treasures, traveling exhibitions spread the word, and those with money vote with their wallets. If price is a gage of popularity, then historic and contemporary Western art has never been more popular.

The American West: Out of Myth, Into Reality is the catalog of a remarkable achievement—a touring exhibition, featuring 127 works of Western art, that, from inception to realization, was mounted in just three years. The achievement is all the more remarkable because several major works are included. Its title may be a bit misleading, since *Reality* refers not to a more realistic vision of the Western past in all its diversity, but to the idea that the mythic substance of Western art constitutes a reality all its own. This reality encompasses the celebration of national progress, the identification of Western wilderness with a New World Eden, and the glorification of the Wild and Woolly West as a masculine domain. The proposed period-

ization—subdividing the nineteenth century into four “phases” ending with a nostalgic commemoration of the old frontier—is problematic. The fourth phase, after all, antedates the end of the frontier. This is why the short entry arguing for the noble savage as a post-frontier construct cites a painting dating from 1847 as well as a bronze dating from 1898; obviously lamenting change and celebrating the uncorrupted nobleman of forest and prairie were constants in Western art. Otherwise, how could we account for the entire enterprise that brought George Catlin west in the 1830s?

One inspired decision in this catalog was to use the talents of others in the program at the Charles M. Russell Center for the Study of Art of the American West at the University of Oklahoma, where Peter Hassrick, the exhibition’s curator, served as director from 1998-2001. Following his extended introduction, Donna Davies, Stephanie Foster Rahill, and Bradley A. Finson contribute fifteen thematic commentaries. The seven by Rahill are sound, the seven by Finson more speculative. The “phallic butte” Finson detects in the foreground of Alfred Jacob Miller’s *Trappers Saluting the Rocky Mountains* is a

stretch, not only because a cigar is sometimes just a cigar, but because the formation in question does not meet the classic test for a phallic symbol: anything longer than is wide. I doubt that Indians were ever regarded as an "avaricious" foe (124), and Henry Farny's *Rounded Up by God* clearly shows a cowboy, not a cavalryman (142). Perhaps juggling works in the exhibition and commentaries in the catalog explains certain technical errors. The notes in the text after note 23 are misnumbered, while the painting described in the text on page 70, Albert Bierstadt's *El Capitan, Yosemite Valley, California*, is not the painting illustrated in the catalog as figure 19. Missteps aside, it is good to find a new generation of scholars grappling with the meaning of works once regarded as boringly literal and to see that the Western art tradition still invites scrutiny by inquiring minds.

Visions of the West is concerned with a different kind of reality. It showcases an unorthodox corporate collection heavy in material culture and folk art and unusually representative of diversity through its Native American, Mexican, African American, and cowgirl objects. "Pluralism," according to its curator, Melissa Baldrige, is the Torch Energy collection's defining feature. Housed in Houston, it bears a strong Texas stamp, reflective of the tastes of the company's founder J. P. Bryan, who also collects rare Texana (unrepresented here) and firearms and spurs. The firearms are treated as the products of nineteenth-century industrial ingenuity and as works of art, while the spurs illustrate the dominance of the Hispanic tradition in shaping that supposedly most Anglo-American of cultural heroes, the cowboy. Nevertheless, guns and spurs (and cowgirl memorabilia, for that matter) challenge Baldrige's disdain for "cowboy art," a tradition she attributes to Frederic Remington and Charles Russell without knowing much about either evidently, since she has them converging thematically at the very point where they clearly diverge, in presenting "a simple drama where red and white square off in mortal combat" (x). Though Patricia Lim-

erick is Baldrige's hero, Limerick's introduction to *Visions of the West* is more inclusive: instead of dissing Western painting and sculpture celebrating white pioneering progress, she would add other kinds of art from other periods and other cultures to the older mixture. The one person who might have clarified the point of the Torch Energy collection is Bryan himself, but he devotes his foreword to his collecting philosophy: be knowledgeable and snap up the rarest things you can find. So guns and spurs it is, as part of a novel definition of pluralism.

The catalog proper consists of nine loosely related essays and one artist's statement. Emma Hansen speculates that the efflorescence of Plains Indian art beginning in the late nineteenth century was a form of cultural affirmation in an era of assimilation; one might add market factors to the equation, since a demand for authentic "Indian curios" was also a component of white frontier nostalgia. Catholic influences in the Southwest are addressed in three essays, two (by Giberto Hinojosa and Maria Turok) accompanying photographic portfolios—commissioned by Torch Energy—of Texas missions and Mexican fiestas. The latter, part of an ambitious ethnographic project begun in 1990 by Houston photographer George O. Jackson Jr., *The Essence of Mexico*, is squarely in the tradition of Edward S. Curtis down to the search for "pure" syncretic religious ritual in the face of creeping secularization. Gloria Fraser Giffords's essay on Christian art in Mexico is one of only two in the catalog to address aesthetic issues directly through specific reference to works (mainly *retablos*) in the Torch Energy collection. The other is the concluding essay by Becky Duval Reese on Texas art, which reveals the collection's particular strength in Regionalist paintings and lithographs. In contrast, the historical overview of black experience in the nineteenth-century West by William Loren Katz is entirely unrelated to the collection's drawings and sculptures by African American artists dating mostly from the 1980s and 1990s. The historical surveys

of spurs and firearms by, respectively, Jane Pattie and Richard Rattenbury effectively contextualize many of the objects shown, but I am still at a loss as to the focus of the cowgirl collection that elicits a breezy essay by Gail Gilchrist.

Given their contrasting definitions of reality (only Reese agrees with Hassrick that myth is reality, too), it is not surprising that the two catalogs share in common just one artist, Frederic Remington, a master of realistic reportage and a mythmaker supreme. He is represented in *The American West* by six works, including his iconic sculpture *The Bronco Buster*—a piece of cowboy art if ever there was one—and an 1888 illustration showing

a white officer, Remington himself, and a column of “buffalo soldiers” riding across the Arizona desert. In *Visions of the West* Remington is represented by a single painting, a sequel showing the black troopers on the same patrol watering their horses. No red and white squaring off; just blacks and whites soldiering on together. Remington did not do many paintings showing African Americans, but he did some, and every museum wants one. Out of myth, into the New Western History.

BRIAN W. DIPP

Department of History
University of Victoria-British Columbia
President-elect, Western History Association