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Review of *Charles Fritz: 100 Paintings Illustrating the Journals of Lewis and Clark: The Complete Collection* by Charles Fritz

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The traditional Lewis and Clark buff will find much enjoyment in Charles Fritz: 100 Paintings Illustrating the Journals of Lewis and Clark: The Complete Collection. Fritz’s delineation gives accurate impressions of the majesty of diverse topographies, ranging from the low-slung prairies of Nebraska to the rugged mountain chains at the Great Divide. His depictions of the North Dakota winter convey the special quality of light produced only by the frigid stillness of the High Plains. Fritz has an extraordinary ability to paint water, from the slow grace of the Missouri River to the thundering falls on the Columbia to the salty mystery of the Pacific Ocean. He paints the American West with uncanny skill and boundless passion.

Individuals with deep knowledge of the voyage, however, may find much about which to quibble. Fritz’s impressionist painting style by definition defeats his own goals. Although it places him within a specific trajectory regarding the art of the American West, it defies the historical accuracy Fritz implicitly claims in his introduction. One might wish for Fritz
to have employed the academic, neoclassical painting style favored by Thomas Jefferson's contemporaries, such as the American John Trumbull (1756–1843). Additionally, contrary to Fritz's depiction, Sacagawea was an adolescent girl, and the corps was decidedly multiracial. Further, if the series were truly a comprehensive illustration of the journals, one might anticipate more than one study of the hundreds of flora and fauna species described throughout them.

Fritz presents us with history paintings that reinforce a single-minded heroic narrative: the solemn funeral procession for Sergeant Charles Floyd Jr., the physical demands of the portages, the intense camaraderie of the co-captains at Fort Clatsop, and the dignity of York. Missing is the human experience of thirst, hunger, exhaustion, filth, and the adventure of being deep in an uncharted continent.

The overall purpose of the volume is rather ambiguous. Nowhere does Fritz detail the important role these paintings played in the bicentenary celebrations as a traveling exhibition. The summary of the expedition adds little, and the language from the journals is left uncited. Fritz retraces the well-scribed, much-loved story of the expedition. He leaves untouched any exploration of why he believes that Lewis and Clark continue to fill our imagination and complete the foundation of our national character. He instead favors heroes set in an unchanging, grand landscape.

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