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February 1993

## Review of *Thomas Moran and the Surveying of the American West* by Joni Louise Kinsey

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Kennedy, Martha, "Review of *Thomas Moran and the Surveying of the American West* by Joni Louise Kinsey" (1993). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 100.  
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**Thomas Moran and the Surveying of the American West.** Joni Louise Kinsey. Washington, DC and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992. x + 236 pp. Photos and references. \$34.95 paper.

Along with Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902) and a few others, Thomas Moran (1837-1926) created some of the most memorable and influential paintings of the American West in the late nineteenth century. Joni Louise Kinsey presents the first thorough study of Moran's early pivotal paintings, the products of his experiences with the great survey expeditions of the 1870s into the west.

The author admirably re-assesses three key paintings by Moran, "The Grand Canon of the Yellowstone" 1872, "Chasm of the Colorado" 1873-74, and "Mountain of the Holy Cross" 1875, by persuasively interpreting them within appropriately defined historical, social, and cultural contexts. In the interdisciplinary approach and narrower scope of her study, Kinsey has produced a work different from but no less important than Thurman Wilkins' broader biographical study. In addition to the artist's papers, drawings, and studies, Kinsey employs an impressive array of other primary sources including U.S. Geological Survey records, photographs, Congressional documents, and various railroad companies' records. Discussing important formative influences such as John Ruskin's aesthetic theories, paintings by early teacher James Hamilton and J. M. W. Turner, the author explicates how Moran evolved his artistic approach to the western scenery he studied on the survey expeditions of Ferdinand V. Hayden and John Wesley Powell. The role of the artist on such expeditions was not merely to document and inform, but rather to "amplify on findings by geologists, geographers," and other scientists. Pointing out that such expeditionary illustrations were not only exhibited as landscape art, but also reproduced in varied publications and used to inform government officials and the public about the West, Kinsey also argues persuasively that Moran's vivid watercolors were among items Hayden used in effectively lobbying for passage of the Yellowstone Park Bill.

In regard to his own approach to nature, Moran stated, "I do not mean to depreciate Nature or naturalism, but I believe that a place as a place, has no value

itself for the artist only so far as it furnishes the material from which to construct a picture . . . .” In contrast, he seemed to value studying particular places when he asserted, “In painting . . . I have to have knowledge. I must know the geology. I must know the rocks and trees . . . .” These seeming contradictions become resolved by Kinsey as she illuminates Moran’s creative process. Kinsey notes, for example, how Moran made repeated use of landscape elements (i.e. arches, towers, trees, rocks, rainbows) which were imbued with meanings and functioned as visual metaphors alluding to the mysteries of creation.

Building on this framework, the author offers a perceptive, thorough, iconographic reading of the painting, a unique interpretation of Moran’s Yellowstone as a natural wonderland of fantastic forms and vivid color. She also clarifies the artist’s crucial relationship with photographer William Henry Jackson by showing that Moran did not represent one single viewpoint in his first great painting of Yellowstone, but rather, drew upon many visual sources (his own observations, drawings, watercolors, and several Jackson photographs)—in short, multiple points of view—to create a composite image, a synthesis of his visual experience which conveys a strong sense of place.

Kinsey puts forth equally impressive analyses of Moran’s early paintings of the Grand Canyon and the Mount of the Holy Cross. Major John Wesley Powell’s understanding of the geology and geography of the Southwest strongly influenced the artist when he accompanied Powell’s 1873 expedition to the Grand Canyon. Kinsey ably conveys the impact of Powell’s ideas on the artist in her explanation of his painting of the great chasm. She follows up the interpretation of each painting with a chapter on the uses and transformations of Moran’s images. She then asserts that the three paintings form a triptych in the nation’s evolving notions of the American West.

While the 8 color plates and 101 black and white illustrations add immeasurably to the book, one wishes that these included colored reproductions of a few of Moran’s watercolors. But this is a minor point. Attractively designed, well organized and reasoned, Kinsey’s book contributes innovative and valuable interpretations of Moran’s early paintings and sets a high standard for studies of major artists of the American West. **Martha Kennedy**, *Curator, Great Plains Art Collection, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.*