



*DISCOVERED LANDS  
INVENTED PASTS*

Transforming  
Visions  
of the  
American  
West

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# Contents

Preface	vii	
Introduction	xi	
Jules David Prown		
1	“Curious Historical Artistic Data”: <i>Art History and Western American Art</i>	1
	Nancy K. Anderson	
2	Telling Tales on Canvas: <i>Landscapes of Frontier Change</i>	37
	William Cronon	
3	The Moving Finger Writes: <i>Western Art and the Dynamics of Change</i>	89
	Brian W. Dippie	
4	The Public Life of Western Art	117
	Martha A. Sandweiss	
5	The Absent Other: <i>Women in the Land and Art of Mountain Men</i>	135
	Susan Prendergast Schoelwer	
6	Looking Backward, Looking Forward: <i>Selected Themes in Western Art since 1900</i>	167
	Howard R. Lamar	
Contributors	193	
Notes	194	
Index	209	



## Telling Tales on Canvas: *Landscapes of Frontier Change*

William Cronon

Among the most famous images of western American art—so famous that many no doubt regard it as a cliché—is Emanuel Leutze’s mural of migrating pioneers, which decorates the U.S. Capitol building in Washington, D.C. An equally famous (and equally clichéd) line from Bishop George Berkeley’s poem supplies Leutze’s title: *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*.<sup>1</sup>

The composition assembles a hodgepodge of familiar icons to celebrate the American migration westward (fig. 19). Horses and riders strain to move covered wagons up steep, rocky slopes. Rifle-toting frontiersmen direct the party forward while axmen toil to clear the way ahead. As the wagons pass, a mourning family erects a cross and conducts a funeral for a loved one who will never complete the journey. And at the center of the composition is a buckskinned figure that can only be Daniel Boone reincarnated, leaning over a mother and her infant—themselves the very picture of a Raphaelite Madonna and child—while gesturing confidently toward the western horizon. Leutze clearly intended this westward gesture to express all that was most hopeful in America’s manifest destiny, a vision of national progress in which the frontier experience and the dream of new lives on virgin lands would be the foundation of American unity. The optimism of the mural was all the more poignant for its having been completed in 1862, before the new Capitol was even finished, and as the bloody ordeal of national union had barely begun.

The landscape of Leutze’s painting plays backdrop to the human drama in the foreground. The Boone character and his Madonna sit atop a small hillock that is echoed by a large rocky outcrop behind them, where two men have scrambled to get a better view of the way ahead. The outcrop is echoed in turn by foothills leading up toward snowcapped peaks that fill the upper right-hand quadrant of the painting, sublime sentinels looking down upon the great migration below. But the landscape that matters most to the composition lies elsewhere. Off to the west, lit by the golden light of an unseen setting sun, lies a broad flat plain with the glistening hint of an ocean beyond. Our travelers have evidently just crested a pass in the mountains and



facing page and above:  
Details of figure 43  
Collection E. William Judson



19  
Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze  
*Westward the Course of Empire  
Takes Its Way*, c. 1861  
Oil study on canvas, 30 x 40  
in. (76.2 x 101.6 cm.), The  
Thomas Gilcrease Institute of  
American History and Art,  
Tulsa, Oklahoma

are about to make their way down to the new Canaan below. Relief and excitement illuminate every face, and if we have any doubt about the ultimate destination of this party, an inset landscape of San Francisco Bay immediately below the main composition shows us the end of the road.

Strikingly, though, Leutze's California is almost featureless. The western portion of his composition is entirely a landscape of expectation, the endpoint of a human drama in which Americans on their westward course of empire plod across the broad plains, struggle over mountain passes, and descend at last to a land of plenty. The mountains these travelers are crossing bear little resemblance to the Sierra Nevada, jumbling together instead geological shapes one might expect to find more readily in the Central Rockies or the mesa country of the Southwest. That hardly matters, of course, for in the symbolic language of the painting the mountains serve a purely narrative function. To the right, they are about the uphill battle to build a nation in the face of natural obstacles; to the left, they are about turning points, downward descents, and the rewards of journeys ending. As for the lowlands that glow like the skin of a peach in the light of the western sun, Leutze leaves to the viewer's imagination what these travelers will find when they arrive at their new home. The narrative role of the land toward which the migrants strain is simply to echo the westward gesture of the central character, which is akin to that in William Ranney's *Boone's First*



20

William Tylee Ranney

*Boone's First View of Kentucky*;

1849

Oil on canvas, 36 x 53½ in.

(91.4 x 136 cm.), The Thomas

Gilcrease Institute of

American History and Art,

Tulsa, Oklahoma

*View of Kentucky*, 1849 (fig. 20), painted a dozen years before. In Ranney's composition, the central figure really *is* Daniel Boone, and the landscape toward which he points—Kentucky, the California of prerevolutionary America—is entirely off-canvas. In much the same way, Leutze's California is so much a landscape of dreams that it needs no detail to give it shape in the observer's mind.

Contrast Leutze's heroic tableau with Thomas Cole's equally famous *The Oxbow* (fig. 21).<sup>2</sup> At first glance, the two images could hardly be more different. Where Leutze's landscape is all backdrop, Cole's has virtually no human foreground, save for the artist himself hidden among the rocks as he works at his easel. Where Leutze's painting concentrates on movement at the expense of place, Cole's is the other way around. No one seems to be going anywhere in it, and we are evidently intended to study the landscape itself rather than the lone foreground figure who is painting it for us. Leutze so commits himself to history painting as a genre that we almost ignore his landscape in seeking out the symbols he parades before us. Cole, in contrast, works the devices of a very different genre to make us feel we are seeing a real mountain and a real river that are worth exploring in their own right, places we might even visit if we chose to do so.

And yet despite Cole's greater realism in depicting this well-known view from atop Mount Holyoke in central Massachusetts—one *can* actually visit this place—he too is constructing a meditation on national progress. His symbolism is no less potent than Leutze's, and a good deal subtler. The painting's most striking compositional device is of course the powerful diagonal that divides the landscape into two quite different—indeed, opposing—halves. To the left is the wilderness that Cole himself had pioneered as a central subject for American art. A great storm has just passed through.<sup>3</sup> Its dark clouds remind us of the awesome power of uncontrolled nature, of the sublime forces which romantics like Cole believed could best be encountered on the mountaintop, above the cataract, or amid the storm. God is very near here.

Our eyes are swept downward from the stormclouds by the leaning tree, a familiar device drawn from the works of Claude Lorrain, that Cole used repeatedly in framing his compositions. The tree carries us in turn to the rocky hillside, where we eventually discover the artist's incongruous umbrella, the only linear element to cross the great diagonal and mediate between the two halves of the painting. Cole himself is lost in the shrubbery, and we may miss him altogether as we follow the pointing umbrella down toward the valley below. If the left half of the painting represents wilderness, the right half represents civilization. A pastoral landscape has emerged along the banks of this river, the Connecticut. From our bird's-eye view we can easily survey the gentle lines of a prosperous agricultural countryside below. Sheep graze in a pasture at the lower right, shocked corn dries in a field nearby, and we can even make out the tiny shapes of a few shepherds, farmers, and boatmen going about their work—work that is in fact the real subject of this painting.





21

Thomas Cole  
*The Oxbow (The Connecticut  
River near Northampton)*, 1836  
Oil on canvas, 51½ x 76 in.  
(130.8 x 193 cm.), Copyright ©  
1981 By the Metropolitan  
Museum of Art; The  
Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
New York, Gift of Mrs. Russell  
Sage, 1908

For Cole, unlike Leutze, these tiny human figures are important not as icons of individual or national heroism but as the agents of a transformed landscape. Cole asks us to focus our attention not on the people themselves, but on the things they have done to this land they have made their own. He suggests that the land itself is a document, which we can read as a record of the human lives that have passed upon it. As our eyes travel across the two halves of the painting, we see that the wilderness which is God's first creation has been occupied and remade to fit a more human plan. In this particular place, the transformation seems quite benign. The sublime power of the mountaintop may now be in retreat, but its successor is no less beautiful, an ideal example of a pastoral, middle landscape at its humane best. Cole was explicit in his admiration for this river valley. "Whether we see it at Haverhill, Northampton, or Hartford," he wrote, "it still possesses that gentle aspect; and the imagination can scarcely conceive Arcadian vales more lovely or more peaceful than the valley of the Connecticut—its villages are rural places where trees overspread every dwelling, and the fields upon its margin have the richest verdure."<sup>4</sup>

And yet Cole was not completely sanguine even about this beautiful countryside. The human progress it recorded was as yet incomplete, so that no one could say how far it might finally proceed. In the lazy turn of the great oxbow—echoed by the circling birds at the edge of the storm—we can make out the shape of a question mark: where is all this headed? Comparing American landscapes such as this one with the ruins of classical Europe, Cole argued that "American associations are not so much of the past as of the present and the future. . . . In looking over the yet uncultivated scene, the mind's eye may see far into futurity. Where the wolf roams, the plough shall glisten; on the gray crag shall rise temple and tower—mighty deeds shall be done in the now pathless wilderness; and poets yet unborn shall sanctify the soil."<sup>5</sup> All this sounds noble enough. But even as he celebrated such progress, Cole spoke of the things he feared would be sacrificed along the way. "I cannot but express my sorrow," he wrote, "that the beauty of such landscapes is quickly passing away—the ravages of the axe are daily increasing—the most noble scenes are made destitute, and oftentimes with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a civilized nation. The wayside is becoming shadeless, and another generation will behold spots, now rife with beauty, desecrated by what is called improvement; which, as yet, generally destroys Nature's beauty without substituting that of Art."<sup>6</sup>

As God's clouds pass from above this landscape, more profane ones are gathering below. Here and there amid the fields, the smoking stacks of a few factories are beginning to appear. In distant valleys, the bluish haze from burning woodlands marks places where forests are being cleared to make way for future farms. And in his most overt act of symbolism, Cole has added to the farthest hillside a few curiously shaped clearings where woodsmen have been at work in the forest. They trace out Hebrew letters that approximate the word *Noah*; viewed upside-down, they form the word

*Shaddai*, the Almighty. Until the ax-wielders return, these letters are a reminder that God stands witness to this scene, but they too will undoubtedly be erased as the relentless clearing goes on.

Cole's willingness to insert such bald symbolism into this seemingly naturalistic scene suggests that his landscape painting is no less historically minded than Leutze's. But where Leutze offers patriotic hope and celebration, Cole shares with us a veiled sense of foreboding. *The Oxbow* records nothing less than a turning point in the history of American civilization. As such, it situates itself within the epic cycle of Cole's five-part series on the *Course of Empire* (New-York Historical Society)—also painted in 1836—in which he recorded the rise and fall of classical civilization as it moved through the savage and pastoral states toward the decadent consummation of empire and ultimate collapse. Cole interrupted work on *Course of Empire*—and actually reused his earliest discarded canvas from the series—to paint this view from Mount Holyoke.<sup>7</sup> Empire was thus much on his mind as he worked. The painting expresses his ambivalent affection for two landscapes, the wild and the pastoral, which form the first two panels of the *Course of Empire* series. In *The Oxbow*, Cole captures the moment of transition between the two and acknowledges the beauty of both. But he evidently also fears for a future in which the pastoral valley will swallow up the sublime mountainside and then be swallowed in turn by the urban-industrial empire to follow. "Nature," he wrote, "has spread for us a rich and delightful banquet. Shall we turn from it? We are still in Eden; the wall that shuts us out of the garden is our own ignorance and folly."<sup>8</sup>

*The Oxbow* and *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* offer important lessons for those who would seek to trace the history of the American landscape from the visual record of contemporary artists like Cole and Leutze. They remind us of the multiple perspectives from which each such painting must be read before we can begin to understand its meaning. The most obvious information that an environmental historian might wish to extract from these paintings is what the land actually looked like at a particular time in the past. But because landscapes constantly change in response to the people who live upon them, they inevitably reflect a human telos. Even an apparently static image like Cole's describes not just its present moment but a long process of human use that has given this valley its form—a process the painting records as a kind of palimpsest. Furthermore, because so much of American landscape art has a prophetic element pointing toward national progress and its consequences, landscapes such as these also reflect the hopes and anxieties of the artists who paint them. Reading the history of environmental change from these images thus requires us to place each painting in a dynamic continuum that encompasses not just the painting's present moment but the past from which the landscape emerged and the future toward which its artist believed it was heading. To learn the story each painting tells, in other words, we must discover in it three key elements: a snapshot

record of a particular instant, a chronicle of past use, and a vision of future change. In a painting such as Leutze's, the prophetic telos is so powerful that it overwhelms any representation of the landscape's past or present; in Cole's work, the representation of the present seems so faithful that one can easily miss the painter's prophetic fears. In both cases, we are likely to misread the painting's environmental record if we fail to consider the larger narrative trajectory in which its author embedded it.<sup>9</sup>

Most American landscape paintings locate themselves within a relatively small number of narrative moments, so that one can easily construct a taxonomy of the historical environments they represent. The earliest of these moments consists of what we might call "the first encounter," in which the artist tries to record for the viewer a landscape seen for the first time by European eyes.<sup>10</sup> Many such images were the products of early journeys into territories previously unvisited by European or American explorers. From Sir Walter Raleigh's sixteenth-century expedition to Roanoke to the Pacific Railroad surveys of the mid-nineteenth century, the visual record was a vital adjunct to the enterprise of colonization—educating viewers who might never visit these distant lands themselves, providing information for the use of scientists and politicians, and tempting at least a few people to abandon old homes for new.

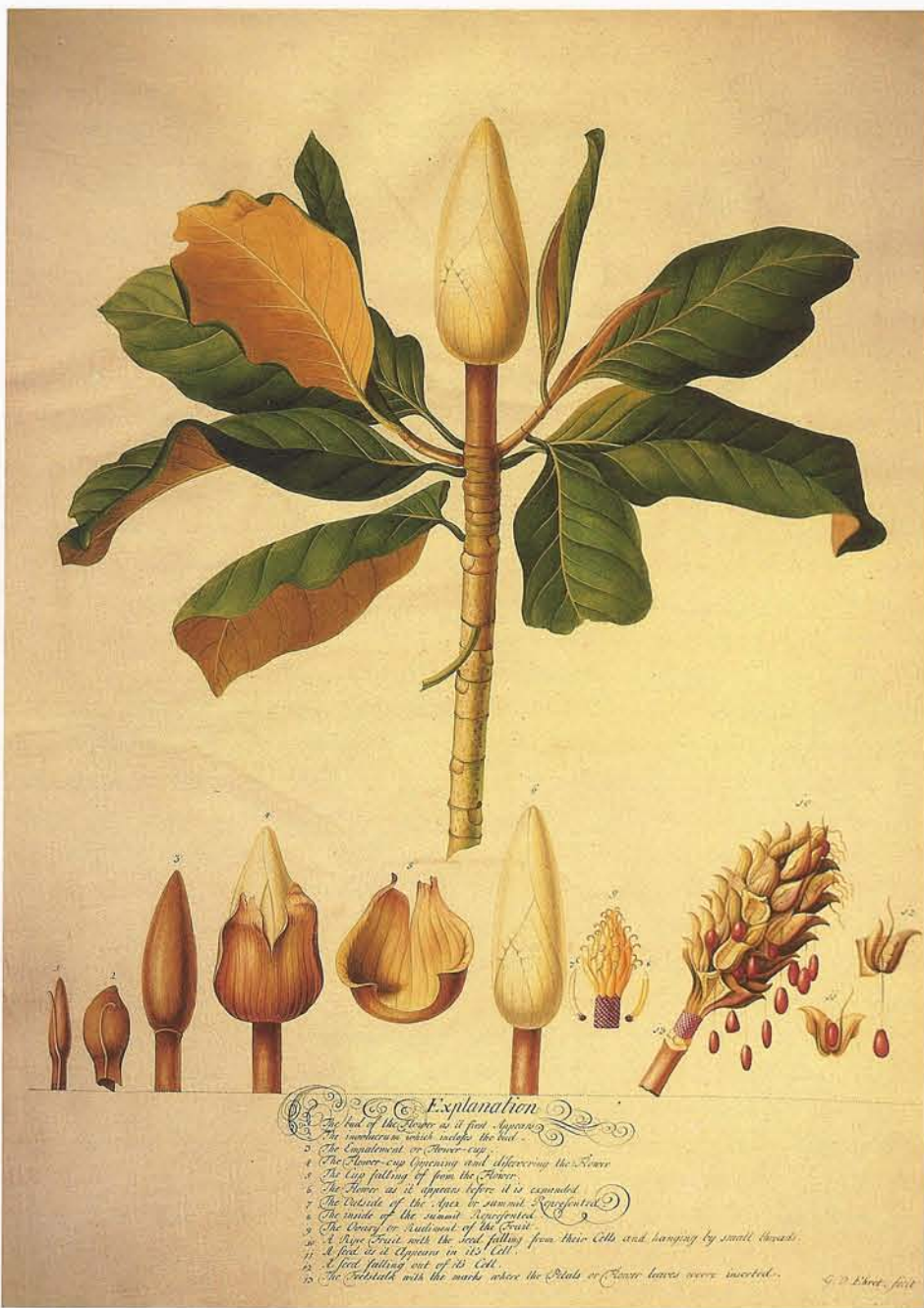
Artists of the first encounter often had one of two distinct narratives in mind as they composed their images. When their purpose was frankly promotional, as was the case with John White's watercolors for the ill-fated Raleigh colony at Roanoke, the image tended to offer a vision of abundance that was meant to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. White's images, after being turned into woodcuts by Theodor de Bry and printed with a glowing text by Thomas Hariot, became the models for an endless parade of booster tracts for centuries to come, in which well-watered woodlands, fertile soils, tame wildlife, and peaceable natives all beckoned to the would-be settler and investor.<sup>11</sup> The exaggerated bounty of such images might spring from political, commercial, or religious motives, but in each case the narrative pointed toward the same end: escape from oppression, an end to scarcity, and the opportunity to rediscover Eden in a new land. Booster artwork of this sort generally focused less on the landscape as a whole than on particular features or resources that bespoke its exotic richness and confirmed its prophetic narrative role as the land of heart's desire. What the image illustrates may thus have less to do with the newly discovered landscape than with its *difference* from the landscape the artist had left behind.

Booster images are ubiquitous in western art, so much so that they occur at every stage of the frontier process and often reflect promotional expectations far more accurately than they record historical landscapes. That is why the more typical image we have in mind when we think of a first encounter with a new land places itself in a different narrative, that of disinterested exploration. The artists whose environmental representations we are apt to trust most are those who believed themselves to be contributing to a story about the expansion of knowledge or progress of science. Stripped

of the booster uses to which they were put, John White's Roanoke watercolors legitimately belong to this genre, but the first self-conscious practitioners of "scientific" art were the natural history artists of the eighteenth century, of whom Mark Catesby is probably the best known. George Dennis Ehret's *Magnolia* (fig. 22) is typical of the genre. Delicately beautiful and yet painstakingly detailed, its clear purpose is to depict this flower as precisely as possible. Indeed, the artist literally dissects the plant before our eyes so that we can understand its inner anatomy as well as its outer appearance. The image is so schematic that it almost becomes a diagram, stripped of all painterly devices that might subvert its scientific purpose.

We can have no doubt of Ehret's commitment to accuracy, and yet even this single flower must be read within a larger narrative that shapes this first artistic encounter with a particular plant in a new land. Scientific illustrations like this one inevitably reflect the science of their day, recording only those elements that contemporary theory defined as essential. Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the great goal of disinterested science was to construct a comprehensive taxonomy of creation, a taxonomy embodied most completely in the Linnean binomial classification system that was perfected at almost the same time that Ehret painted this magnolia. For the taxonomist, the essential meaning of any organism was its place in the abstract hierarchy of species, genus, family, order, class, phylum, and kingdom. Anatomy was the key to reconstructing this vast family tree, which is why Ehret's magnolia had to be subjected to the dissection table before its picture could be complete. Only thus could one discover the hidden ties of kinship and the archetypes of creation that had called this species into being.

No matter how accurate this picture might be, then, its theoretical underpinnings required it to be radically incomplete. For one thing, this is not meant to be the picture of a *particular* magnolia; it is rather an archetype for *all* magnolias, and is stripped of details that might render it individual or unique. For much the same reason, the flower has no context, whether ecological or cultural. Ehret has isolated the plant from its natural setting. It is no accident that the image contains no trace of a real landscape save for this single precise but abstract blossom. The science of a later day might have focused the painter's attention on the soils in which this tree grew, the climatic conditions in which it thrived, the time of year in which it flowered or went to seed, the other plants and animals that were associated with it, the cultural uses that local people made of it, and even the meanings they assigned to it. These and any number of other equally interesting details would have linked the magnolia to a larger environment and placed it in a particular landscape. None of them, however, was relevant to eighteenth-century taxonomy, and so the landscape of Ehret's image consists of blank vellum. For all its apparent accuracy, it too reflects the narrative moment—tracing the cutting edge of a very particular kind of scientific discovery—in which its author placed it.



22  
 George Dennis Ehret  
*Magnolia*, undated,  
 c. 1726–1743  
 Watercolor on vellum,  
 21 x 14 in. (53.3 x 35.6 cm.),  
 The Thomas Gilcrease  
 Institute of American History  
 and Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma

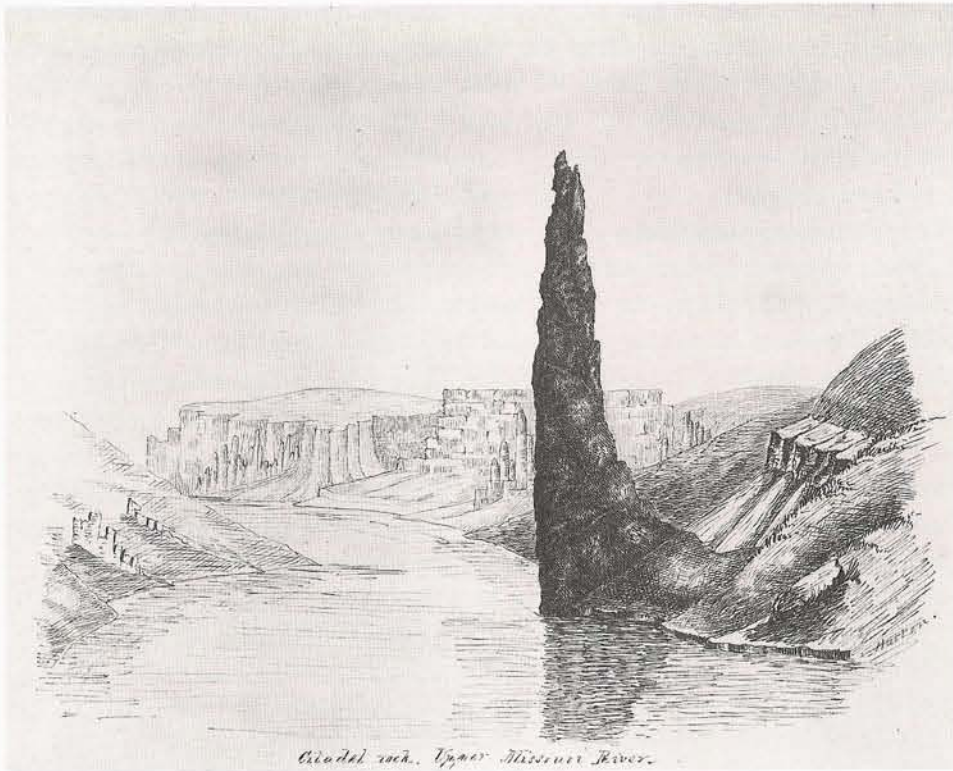
This is why, oddly enough, many of the earliest and most scientific representations of the American landscape are less useful than one might like in helping to understand the history of that landscape, even if only to supply a base-line against which to measure subsequent change. The environmental transformations that Thomas Cole sought to capture as a record of human progress from his perch atop Mount Holyoke—the cutting of forests, the plowing of fields, the waxing and waning of wild and domestic species—were not the sort that needed to appear in a taxonomic illustration. Whether a particular place had one magnolia or a million was irrelevant to that species' place in the underlying order of nature. The legacy of this taxonomic approach is apparent even in John James Audubon's encyclopedic *Birds of America* series. Unlike Ehret, Audubon sought to include in his paintings some hint of the natural habitat in which a bird might typically be found. His life-sized *Wild Turkey*, 1845 (fig. 23), is surrounded by a few stalks of grass and the hint of a cane brake—an innovation by the standards of earlier taxonomic art—but these give scanty ecological context. The landscape here is essentially emblematic rather than historical; one can learn little from this image about how turkey populations and habitats were actually faring during Audubon's lifetime.

The emergence of new scientific agendas in the nineteenth century changed the way artists recorded their first encounters with American landscapes. Although the eighteenth-century fascination for taxonomy continued unabated, it was now supplemented by historical geology, ethnography, and eventually Darwinian biology. The new geology that James Hutton and Charles Lyell had pioneered in England gave scientific artists new incentive to focus not just on individual species but on the landscape itself as an object of serious study. *Citadel Rock. Upper Missouri River* (fig. 24), sketched by J. D. Hutton for one of the government topographical expeditions of the 1850s, shows some of the consequences of this new approach. Suddenly the nonliving elements of the landscape dominate our attention. No longer do plants or animals, either as individuals or as species, occupy center stage, for they would detract from the geological purpose of this image—and so they disappear almost completely. Instead, the specimen diagrammed before us is the terrain itself.

With the artist's new concern for nonliving landscapes came a much stronger emphasis on *time* and its role in shaping topography. History is much more present in this image than in Ehret's *Magnolia* or Audubon's *Wild Turkey*; in which the only time that matters is the original creation. The history of this particular place is that of an ancient volcano eroding to leave only its black inner core towering above the surroundings. Seen through the lens of geology, the landscape here is dynamic, even exciting, but its story can be heard only if we are willing to listen hundreds of thousands or millions of years. It is thus hardly surprising that there is no human presence in this image, for the age-old events it records are far removed from human ken. Like plants and animals, people have had nothing to do with shaping the essential archi-







24

James D. Hutten

*Citadel Rock. Upper Missouri River*, c. 1859–1860

Pen and ink on paper, 5¼ x 7⅝ in. (13.3 x 19.4 cm.), Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

texture of what we see here. They would at best be decorative distractions from the artist's scientific purpose. The only cultural meaning that matters here is that of geology itself. How people might inhabit, use, or change this place cannot be inferred from the information Hutton chooses to give us.

For all these reasons, the scientific art of taxonomists and geologists provides a remarkably thin record of landscape history as it relates to the actions of human beings. Far more useful in this respect are works of art produced in the service of ethnography, and more loosely geographical studies that simply recorded what an artist saw without trying to fit it to a particular scientific mold. In both cases, native peoples more often than not served as the subjects of such images, and the surrounding landscape can therefore be quite sketchy or even absent. Artists sometimes seemed to collect Indians almost as Ehret and the taxonomists collected new species, as in the many portraits that were meant to exemplify the costumes and racial features of an entire tribe. Louis Choris's *Costumes de femme et têtes de femme du golfe de Kotzebu*, circa 1816 (see fig. 78), is a good example of the genre, in which the artist's

*facing page:*

23

John James Audubon

*Wild Turkey*, undated, c. 1845

Oil on canvas, 45 x 35 in.

(114.3 x 85.8 cm.), The Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma

purpose is to depict a type rather than a person. The best western artists—Karl Bodmer above all others—managed to fulfill their ethnographic assignment while preserving the individual humanity of the Indians who sat before them. But the search for typology informed all ethnographic art, which means that the landscapes one encounters in such works, with few exceptions, are present not for their own sake but to exemplify Indian life.

By the middle third of the nineteenth century, artists who set out to record the unknown peoples and places of America knew all too well that the unknown was fast disappearing, and profoundly changing in the act of becoming known. And so the narrative moment of first encounter takes on a new urgency in its final phase, as artists and explorers sought to preserve what they saw as the last remnants of a “new” world that was actually quite ancient. Seen through the romantic eyes of nineteenth-century Europeans and Americans, the native cultures of this old new world seemed likely to disappear altogether as the course of empire continued its inexorable westward way, so that the first encounter with Indians might all too easily be the last. George Catlin conveys this feeling best:

I have, for many years past, contemplated the noble races of red men who are now spread over these trackless forests and boundless prairies, melting away at the approach of civilization. Their rights invaded, their morals corrupted, their lands wrested from them, their customs changed, and therefore lost to the world; and they at last sunk into the earth, and the ploughshare turning the sod over their graves, and I have flown to their rescue—not of their lives or of their race (for they are “doomed” and must perish), but to the rescue of their looks and their modes, at which the acquisitive world may hurl their poison and every besom of destruction, and trample them down and crush them to death; yet, phoenix-like, they may rise from “the stain of a painter’s palette,” and live again upon canvass, and stand forth for centuries yet to come, the living monuments of a noble race.<sup>12</sup>

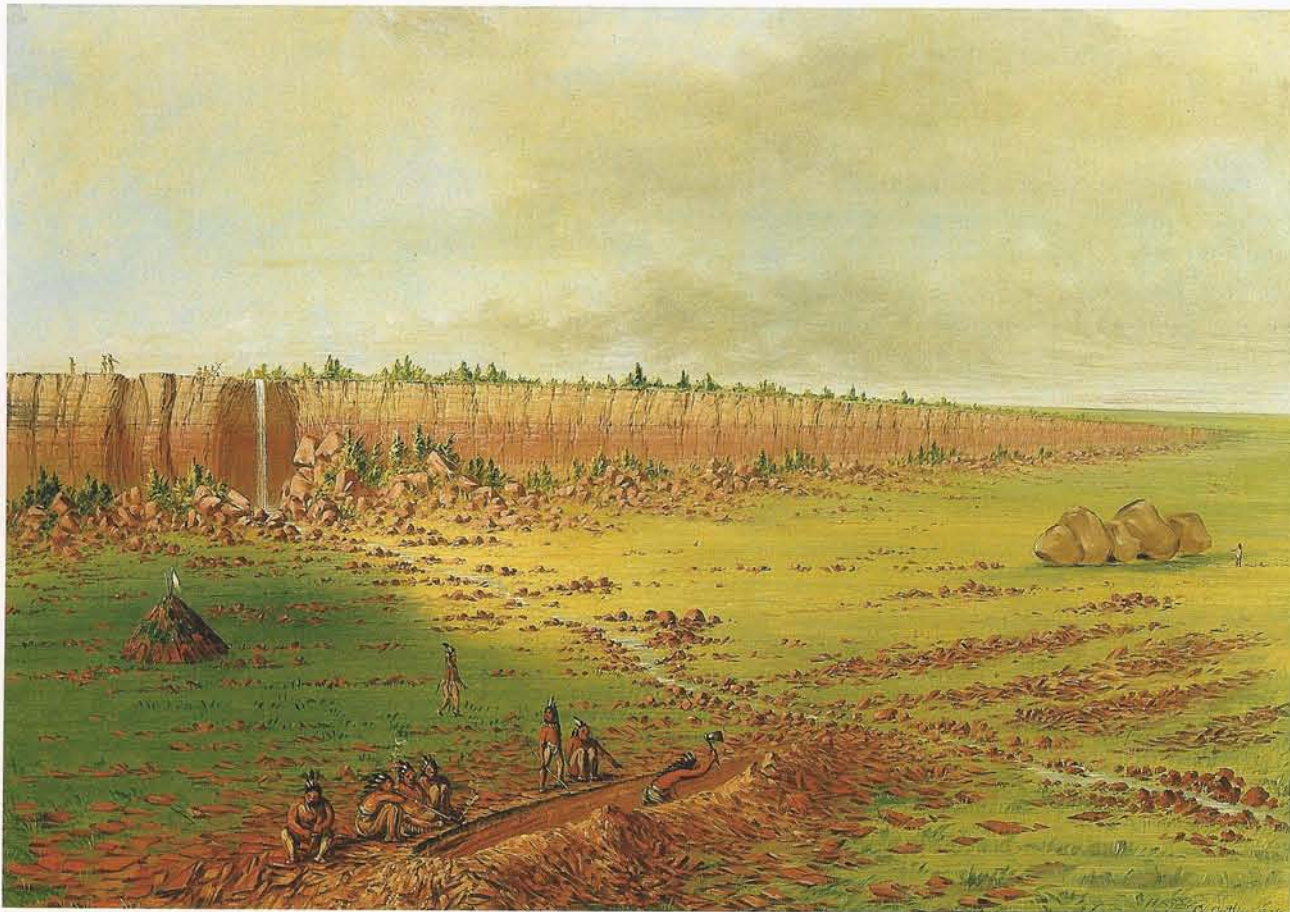
In short, the goal of the ethnographer’s art—and Catlin’s commercial project as a painter—was to preserve the memory of a “race” whose traditional way of life had supposedly been timeless and unchanging until the intrusion of Europeans precipitated its collapse. Such a vision did violence to the complex cultural histories of Indian peoples, but had great romantic power.

Thinking about Indians in this way had indirect implications for the record of landscape change. If Indians had preserved their ancient customs from time immemorial, inhabiting an ethnographic present that had only recently entered history, then their landscape too must be equally timeless. Although we now know that Indian peoples across the continent profoundly altered the environments of North America, most notably through their use of fire, such alterations almost never appear in art.<sup>13</sup> Catlin left us at least two sketches of *Prairie Meadows Burning* and *Prairie Bluffs Burning*, both 1852 (both National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institu-

tion, Washington, D.C.), but in neither does he suggest the Indian role in *setting* such fires; instead, he portrays burning grass as a powerful natural force to which Indians had to adapt or perish.<sup>14</sup> Paradoxically, then, the very wish to preserve a vanishing “natural” way of life distorted its historical reality. Evidence that Indians had dynamic, changing relationships to the land around them—and equally dynamic cultures—is not likely to appear in such images.

Matters weren’t helped by the belief among many European and American observers that Indians were rootless nomads who wandered hither and yon across the landscape without ever settling down to make it their own. People who moved so constantly could hardly be expected to alter or “improve” the land in any significant way. False enough of nomads, this view was even more distorting for those groups that grew their own food. Although Indians in most parts of eastern North America depended for the bulk of their food on crops they raised themselves, depictions of Indian agriculture are virtually absent from the visual record. John White’s watercolor of the cornfields surrounding an Indian village near Roanoke is almost unique in this respect.<sup>15</sup> Instead, the Indians we encounter in art are almost all hunters. As a corollary, they are usually male as well, so that the female world of planting and gathering, and of processing the bounty of the hunt, gets short shrift. An Indian brave riding bareback on a noble stallion while shooting arrows at stampeding bison could be assimilated almost effortlessly into a long iconographic tradition of equestrian and military art. It may thus be no accident that most nineteenth-century Indian depictions portray the plains tribes that seemed most closely to approximate the European myth of the noble hunter-savage. The visual models for creating equally striking images of women weeding corn or digging groundnuts or cleaning intestines were not nearly so readily available. Furthermore, male Euroamerican artists might well have been denied access to such scenes even if they had wished to depict them. And so many of the most important activities that defined Indian relations with the natural world simply did not get recorded in western art.

From George Catlin, for instance, we can learn a good deal about plains rituals associated with the bison and about the techniques Indians used in killing these animals. We can watch the ritual dances that preceded the hunt, see braves stalk animals on foot or horseback in all seasons of the year, and observe the moment of the kill. Catlin helps us understand how profoundly the world of the plains revolved around the great herds. We get a rough sense from him of Indians living in tepees or earth lodges, and of the way they organized and moved their villages. We even get images of Indians in canoes paddling rivers, pursuing swimming game, and gathering wild rice. But how all this connects to the rest of the natural world remains a mystery. The backgrounds of Catlin’s Indian studies—as opposed to his depictions of particular landscapes—often consist of little more than neatly symmetrical rolling hills, green or snow-covered as the season of his painting required. They usually lack details that



25  
George Catlin  
*Pipestone Quarry, Coteau Des  
Prairies*, 1848  
Oil on canvas, 19 x 26 $\frac{3}{8}$  in.  
(48.3 x 67 cm.), The Thomas  
Gilcrease Institute of  
American History and Art,  
Tulsa, Oklahoma

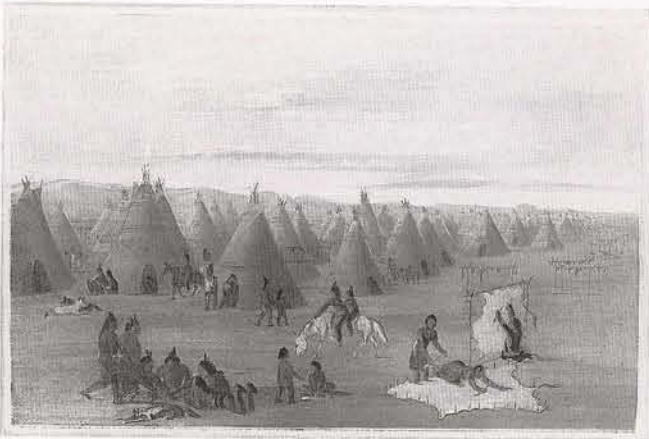
might tell us how Indians selected their camps, where they pastured their horses, when they decided to migrate, which foods other than bison they used to fill their bellies, or what they thought and felt about the world around them. The paintings often seem blurry or out of focus, so we cannot probe them very deeply as we try to understand how Indians situated themselves in the landscapes they called home.

There are important exceptions, of course. Occasionally we do recognize actual places that an Indian might inhabit or that we might visit. One of the most striking is Catlin's *Pipestone Quarry, Coteau Des Prairies*, 1848 (fig. 25), in which a group of Indians work at a small trench to extract the red-brown shale—soon to be named Catlinite in honor of the artist—that they will later carve into bowls for their pipes. Here Indians really are altering the environment around them, leaving a permanent imprint on the landscape, but the effect is so small and so local that nothing in this image undermines our general sense of a nomadic people with no permanent commitment to a particular place. The painter seems more interested in showing his subjects surrounded by their proper scenery than in helping us understand how they have shaped that scenery and given it meaning. Likewise, Catlin's *Commanche Village*,

*Women Dressing Robes and Drying Meat*, 1834–1835 (fig. 26), although depicting no particular landscape, simultaneously suggests the kinds of female labor that linked the outer world of the hunt with the inner world of the camp, and also reveals the social activities that occurred side by side with the most basic productive tasks of tribal life. Such images do help place these people in a larger environmental context.

And yet, as always with Catlin, the painter shows us these things only in the middle distance, without permitting us a more intimate view. His images remain indispensable, and our knowledge of nineteenth-century plains Indian life would be much impoverished without them. That is why it seems almost ungrateful to admit that they often prove frustrating as well. Catlin gives us portraits and landscapes, epic rituals and candid camp scenes, but he never quite ties them together. His brush is too broad, his palette too bold, and his eye for detail too weak to carry us very far into this Indian world. What these people do with their hands, how they use their tools, what they eat and how they prepare it, why they inhabit the land as they do: such things we cannot easily learn from him.

The same is hardly true of that other great ethnographic artist of the plains, Karl Bodmer, who brought to his subject an acute eye for detail, a rigorously disciplined brush, and, through his patron Prince Maximilian, an intellectual agenda that was truly catholic in its interests.<sup>16</sup> The science that Maximilian and Bodmer served was that of Alexander von Humboldt, whose encyclopedic geography encompassed taxonomy, geology, ethnography, and every other science besides. The very ambitiousness of Humboldtian geography kept it from focusing too narrowly on any one thing, and encouraged an artist like Bodmer to record his subjects whole. Although he too included among his watercolors portraits of representative Indians, geologically striking landscapes, and visual specimens of new species—an antelope, a vulture, a toad—Bodmer never let his scientific search for generic phenomena overwhelm his faithful-



26

George Catlin

*Comanche Village, Women  
Dressing Robes and Drying  
Meat*, 1834–1835

Oil on canvas, 20 x 27¼ in.

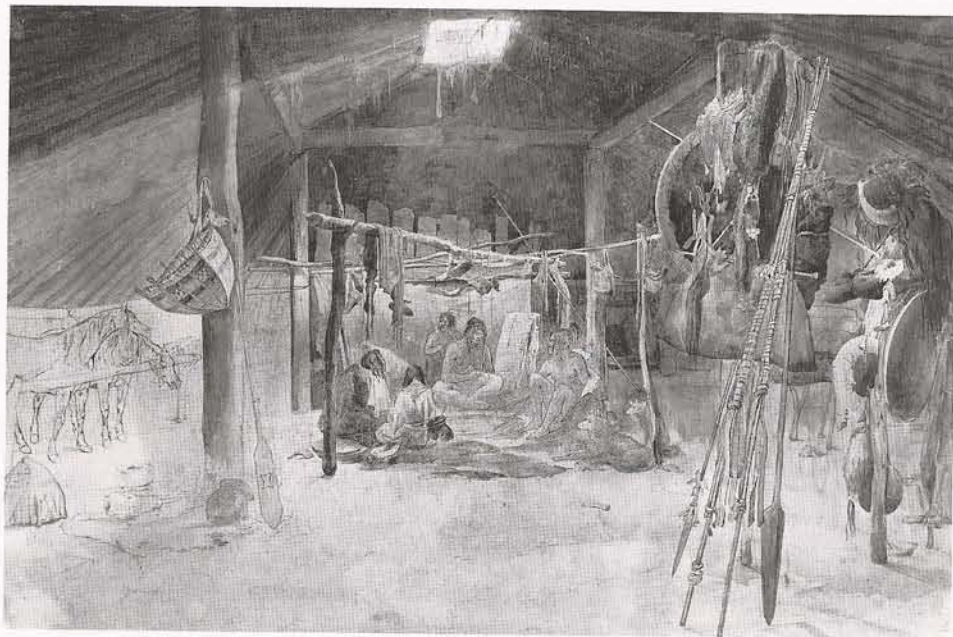
(50.9 x 69.3 cm.), National

Museum of American Art,

Smithsonian Institution, Gift

of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr.

27  
Karl Bodmer  
*Interior of a Mandan Earth  
Lodge Winter Hut*, 1833-1834  
Watercolor and ink on paper,  
11¼ x 16⅞ in. (28.6 x 42.9  
cm.), Joslyn Art Museum,  
Omaha, Nebraska



28  
Karl Bodmer  
*Assiniboin Medicine Sign*, 1833  
Watercolor on paper,  
9⅝ x 12¼ in. (24.4 x 31.1 cm.),  
Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha,  
Nebraska



ness to details. As a result, each of his images has an immediacy and authority that no other artist of the first encounter can surpass.

One has only to study a handful of Bodmer watercolors to sense that the places he shows us are quite real, and are bound to a complex cultural universe in which virtually every object and landscape is suffused with meaning. Although it shows nothing of the outside world save for the sunlight streaming through a hole in the roof, his *Interior of a Mandan Earth Lodge Winter Hut*, 1833–1834 (fig. 27), is filled with visual references that suggest how profoundly this interior space is tied to the surrounding landscape. Large timbers—hardly an abundant commodity on the plains—support the framework that holds up the earthen covering of this dwelling. A basket hangs from one pole, portrayed with such detail that we can study not just its decoration but its construction, and wonder at the skill—probably female—that produced it. Horses are stabled to one side, while dogs sit at attention near the edge of the family circle—privileged creatures who have earned a special place in this otherwise human space. Everywhere there are tools and objects made of materials gathered along nearby watercourses or taken as gifts from animals who have died in the hunt. It is a wooden and leather world, reflecting a cycle of seasonal life that traced a regular path between village cornfields, wooded streams, and the herds of grazing bison.

Virtually any Bodmer image can be read in a similar way. *Cree Woman*, 1833 (see fig. 103), along with every other Bodmer portrait, reveals the rich variety of decorative uses to which the different parts of animals' bodies could be put. *Assiniboin Burial Scaffold*, 1833 (Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha), portrays a tree that is recognizably a cottonwood holding up a platform on which the tribe has erected a shelter for one of its dead, now desiccating like a mummy in the dry plains air. *First Chain of the Rocky Mountains above Fort McKenzie*, 1833 (Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha), not only does justice to the geological strata that line the Missouri River at this point; it depicts the sparse trees that line the watercourse, the short yellowed grasses that cover the hillsides, and the modes of travel an Indian band might use to move through such country. And *Assiniboin Medicine Sign*, 1833 (fig. 28), in which a lone bison skull sits atop an isolated cairn, manages to suggest with quiet but irresistible power the extent to which this seemingly vacant grassland is also a place of spirits in which the dead do not instantly vanish from among the living. Bodmer is more successful than any other artist at conveying to his viewers that this is an Indian landscape, inextricably bound to an Indian way of inhabiting, using, and communicating spiritually with the natural world. In that sense, Bodmer's images have a much richer environmental context than Catlin's and can be pushed much further as documents of their historical landscape.

In spite of their extraordinary quality, though, Bodmer's images share with Catlin's a failing common to all artists who adopted the first encounter as the narrative moment for their paintings. In fact, virtually no image that purports to record such an

encounter actually does so, since most painters came quite late to the frontier areas they visited. (John White is again the chief anomaly.) Bodmer and Catlin visited tribes that had been interacting with white traders for decades, and tribal communities had been incorporating elements of European culture—most notably the horse—for well over a century. The ethnographic impulse to record a “pristine” or “unspoiled” culture, and the associated need to suppress Indian history by depicting timeless peoples in unchanging landscapes, encouraged artists to erase evidence that Indians and Europeans had already mingled quite profoundly by the time an image was made.

The best known case of such an erasure is the famous collection of Indian photographs that Edward Curtis produced at the turn of the twentieth century, in which the photographer sometimes provided traditional props for his subjects and encouraged them to adopt nostalgic poses.<sup>17</sup> But the impulse toward erasure was much more general. Although Catlin and Bodmer’s paintings contain many clues that Indians had a long history of trade with Euroamericans—guns, horses, steel points, fabrics, beads, medallions, and other such objects regularly appear in their portraits—almost none of their images show this sort of intercultural exchange actually taking place. Euroamerican outsiders and their influences almost always manage to evade the artist’s frame, so that we are forced to infer their presence on the margins of the composition without actually seeing them.

The most notable exception to this rule is itself suggestive: both of these ethnographic artists chose to portray the first encounter of Indians and Euroamericans not with traders, but with themselves. Bodmer’s *Travellers Meeting with Minatarre Indians near Fort Clark*, circa 1834 (fig. 29), offers as an icon of cultural encounter a picture of Prince Maximilian and Bodmer negotiating with a group of braves. Although the walls of the fort stand right behind them, although a group of rifle-toting soldiers watch the conversation, and although the negotiation with a top-hatted brave apparently revolves around a horse, none of these intrusive details seems to undermine the aboriginal nature of the encounter. Even more striking in this respect is Catlin’s justly famous *The Author Painting a Chief in an Indian Village*, circa 1841 (fig. 30), in which the act of painting a portrait becomes itself the moment of cultural encounter. An unnamed chief who closely resembles Catlin’s portrait of *Four Bears* stands silently before a schematic pair of tepees as the artist captures his likeness on canvas. Meanwhile, his tribespeople look on, surprised and not a little frightened at this magic flowing from the “stain of a painter’s palette.” Catlin portrays himself as the emissary of an advanced civilization, bringing with him techniques of perspective and representation completely alien to his primitive audience.<sup>18</sup>

The implicit message of these images is that the Indian universe remains as yet complete unto itself. Its fall from innocence, its passage out of the garden, its journey toward the doom Catlin prophesied for it, are only just beginning as the painter hur-





29  
After Karl Bodmer  
*The Travellers Meeting with  
Minitarre Indians near Fort  
Clark, c. 1854*  
Aquatint, 11¼ x 13¼ in. (28.6  
x 34.9 cm.), Joslyn Art  
Museum, Omaha, Nebraska



30  
George Catlin  
*The Author Painting a Chief in  
an Indian Village*, frontispiece  
in Catlin, *Letters and Notes . . .*,  
vol. 1 (London, 1841), Yale  
Collection of Western  
Americana, Beinecke Rare  
Book and Manuscript Library

ries to capture a few fleeting glimpses of the world we are about to lose. The narrative moment of such paintings, then, is the “once upon a time” at the start of a tragic tale whose ending we already know. None of the things we see here will survive—or so the artist fears. The effort to capture “how they lived before” flowed from a powerful anxiety that “how they lived after” would be very different, and in all likelihood not nearly so happy. The desire of ethnographic artists to situate their images on the cusp of this transition—at the last possible moment when one could still record aboriginal cultures in what artists wanted to believe was their “traditional” form—drives such paintings away from history and into timelessness. Their resistance to the narrative of change suggests how powerful that change must have seemed to the painters who tried to erase it from their canvases.

Other painters, of course, chose to locate their Indian landscapes at very different narrative moments. Take, for instance, Alfred Jacob Miller’s *Sir William Drummond Stewart Meeting Indian Chief*, circa 1839 (fig. 31), in which the artist depicts his aristocratic Scottish patron on their tour through the fur districts of the Rocky Mountain West.<sup>19</sup> The painting bears some resemblance to Bodmer’s *Travellers Meeting with Minatarre Indians near Fort Clark*, and indeed the basic subject of the two is virtually identical: European travelers encountering Indians in a distant land. Miller—ever the romantic—has chosen to make his Indians and his landscape far more dramatic than Bodmer’s restrained figures. But the most interesting element of Miller’s painting is on its right margin, in the far distance, where a caravan of overland fur traders is making its way toward Indian country. Indeed, Miller quotes himself in this little vignette, for the composition is close to several paintings he made of fur caravans on the plains. The caravan signals that Miller is showing us not a first encounter but rather the already mingled world that Indians and Euroamericans had jointly created in the West.

Miller openly incorporates fur traders into his visual narrative of life on the plains, and seems little concerned about trying to construct a “pure” image of how Indians might have lived before Europeans appeared among them. One gets little sense from him of an endangered way of life or a culture threatened with destruction by forces beyond its control. Quite the contrary. Far from being imperiled by the arrival of Europeans, his Indians seem quite capable of persuading white trappers to throw off their civilized ways and embrace the gentle pleasures of the forest. Miller’s narrative is thus about a *return* to the garden, not a fall from it. The Indian maiden in *Giving Drink to a Thirsty Trapper*, undated (fig. 32), offers far more than water to her guests. Her beauty, her generosity, her innocence, and her unashamed nakedness remind the viewer of a romantic myth not just of sexuality but of bounty itself. The fertility and abundance of these people and this landscape suggest that Eden has not yet passed from the earth.

As depictions of Indian cultures or western landscapes, Miller’s paintings should



31  
Alfred Jacob Miller  
*Sir William Drummond  
Stewart Meeting Indian Chief*,  
undated, c. 1859  
Oil on canvas, 35 x 42½ in.  
(85.8 x 107.1 cm.), The  
Thomas Gilcrease Institute of  
American History and Art,  
Tulsa, Oklahoma



32

Alfred Jacob Miller  
*Giving Drink to a Thirsty  
Trapper*, undated  
Watercolor on paper, 8 $\frac{1}{16}$  x  
7 $\frac{5}{16}$  in. (20.5 x 18.5 cm.), Yale  
Collection of Western  
Americana, Beinecke Rare  
Book and Manuscript Library

never be taken at face value, for their romanticism too often threatens to become openly sentimental. If one wishes to be ungenerous, one can read them as classic tourist art, akin to the exotic images of beckoning natives in tropical paradises that remain a staple of travel agencies the world over. Miller's true narrative is not about the lives of Indians, their uses of the landscape around them, or what will happen to them in the future. It is rather about a wealthy Scottish lord deciding to make an excursion to a land of romantic adventure in which the false trappings of civilization drop away and the basic innocence and goodness of primitive humanity emerge once again. One would not generally turn first to Miller for a sense of what the western environment actually looked like in the 1830s, for he offers us evidence of quite a different kind. The landscape of Miller's West is a wild utopia, in which the artist and his patron recapitulate one of the oldest myths of western civilization.

Miller reminds us that the underlying narrative of many if not most western paintings is not about Indians at all, but about Europe, America, and the meaning of Nature's Nation.<sup>20</sup> Once artists move beyond the moment of first encounter—whether with newly discovered landscapes, species, or peoples—they begin to trace the story of European Americans moving to a new country and remaking it in their own image. Sometimes it is a story of progress, sometimes one of loss, but always it is about the projection of human desire onto a resisting but yielding land. The narrative begins not with the original inhabitants and the way of life they are about to lose but rather with Euroamerican eyes gazing west toward an unseen horizon.

We have encountered that gaze before, in Emanuel Leutze's *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* and William Ranney's *Boone's First View of Kentucky*. The central characters of these two images, with their pointing fingers and searching eyes, imply most of the remaining narrative moments that have typified artistic representations of the western landscape. The story begins with a vision and a dream, which lead eventually to a westward journey. At the end of that journey is a new home and the struggle to wrest a pastoral life from the wilderness. As the dream progresses, the other trappings of civilization—churches and schools and railroads and towns and factories—begin to give this land a settled look akin to the one the migrants had left behind. In the end, the new world begins to look old, so much so that at least a few of its inhabitants begin to worry that the dream itself may have died along the way. This is of course the epic frontier narrative that served as the nation-building myth of America long before Frederick Jackson Turner gave it the classic form we recognize today. If Leutze's Boone is the start of this story, then Cole's Oxbow lies near its end, and a great many other images find a place somewhere in between.

The frontier narrative of these paintings begins by depicting the emerging web of relationships that link remote landscapes and alien cultures with the forces that most nineteenth-century Americans understood as "progress." Although Alfred Jacob Miller's images purport to record the artist's journey to a gentle, unfallen Eden, they

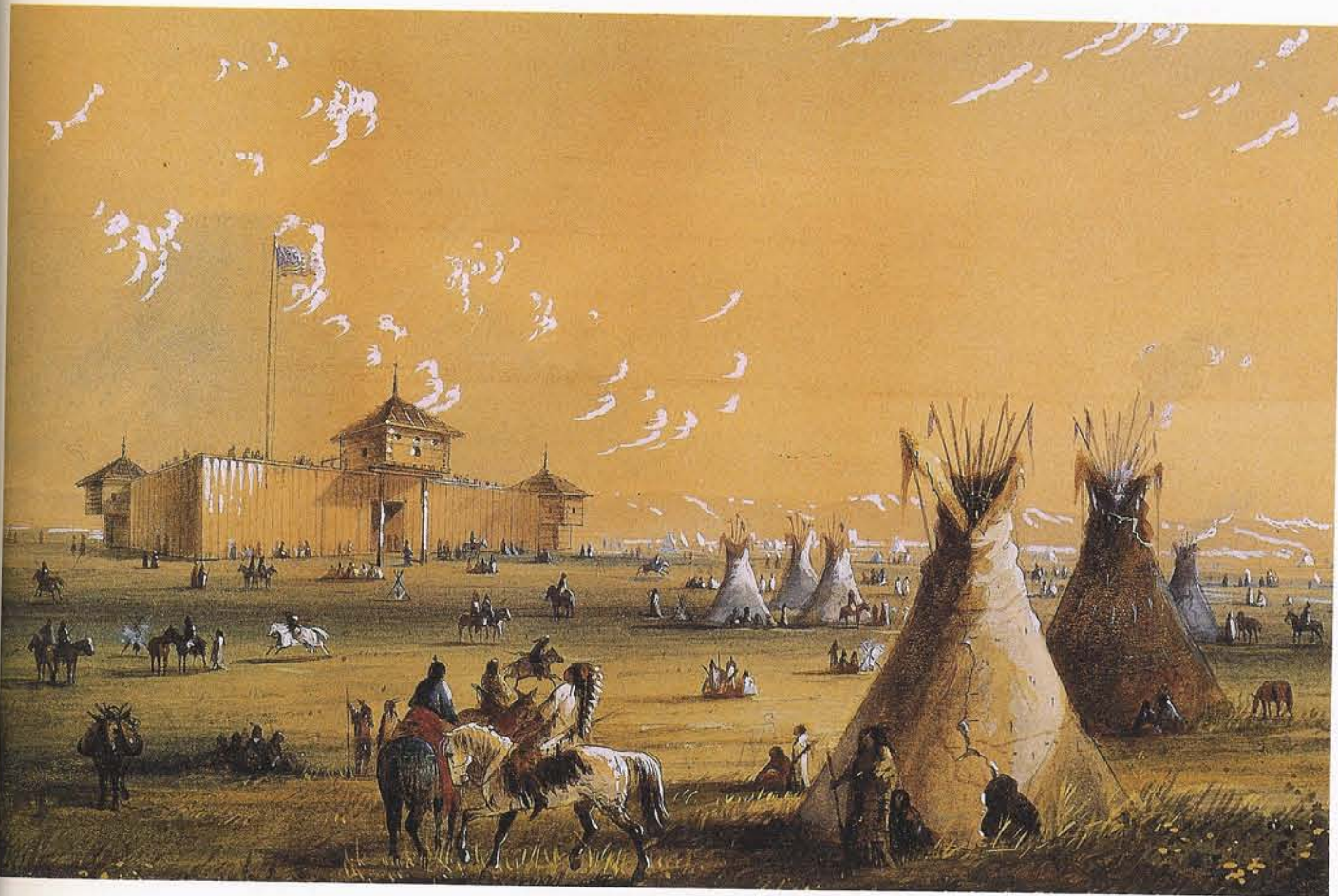
33

Alfred Jacob Miller  
*Racing—near Wind River  
 Mountains* [a scene from the  
 summer fur trading  
 rendezvous], c. 1837–1839  
 Watercolor, pen and ink, and  
 graphite on paper, 7 $\frac{1}{16}$  x 8 $\frac{3}{16}$   
 in. (17.9 x 21.2 cm.), Yale  
 Collection of Western  
 Americana, Beinecke Rare  
 Book and Manuscript Library



also trace the proliferating commercial institutions of the fur trade—which in fact guided and sheltered his patron's party as they traveled. The traders' caravan on the margin of Sir William Stewart's portrait was headed toward one of the Rocky Mountain rendezvous that Miller recorded on other canvases. Images like these situated themselves not at the moment of first encounter—Indians and whites have evidently been traveling these routes for a good while, long enough for wealthy European tourists to feel comfortable about coming along for the ride—but at the moment of intercultural exchange, which became a subject for many western artists.

In images like *Racing—near Wind River Mountains*, circa 1837–1839 (fig. 33), Miller shows us these great open-air gatherings of tribes, traders, and trappers where all manner of commodities—furs, guns, alcohol, trinkets—changed hands amid the festivities. Although Miller clearly wants us to see the rendezvous as a raucous celebration and carousing good time, the broader landscape he captures is one of emerging connections and dependencies. The goods changing hands in the warm glow of this apparent free-for-all have traveled half-way round the planet to get here, shepherded along the way by far-flung transport networks and powerful corporations. This remote spot in the wilderness is being drawn into a metropolitan orbit even as the celebration proceeds. Although one would never at first see Miller's rendezvous paint-



ings as proof that corporate institutions were beginning to exert profound influences over western landscapes, that is in fact their underlying message. That hundreds of whites and Indians had gathered in an isolated Wyoming valley had everything to do with what the traders carried in their caravans and with the skins of dead animals they would take home on their eastward journey. The mammalian populations of western ecosystems would shift in response to these goings-on, as would Indian life-ways on the high plains. In such images, the artist recorded more than he knew.

The institutional side of this narrative about goods changing hands is more evident in the depictions of western trading posts that many artists besides Miller have left us. Miller's best-known such image is his *Fort Laramie*, which he recorded in both exterior and interior view (figs. 34, 35). From the outside, the wooden stockade with its American flag looks an unlikely intrusion amid the surrounding teepees and Indians on horseback. Although it was owned by a private fur syndicate, not by the U.S. Army,

34  
Alfred Jacob Miller  
*Fort Laramie. From Nature* by  
A. J. Miller 1836 & 7, c. 1837  
Watercolor on paper, 7½ x 11⅝  
in. (19 x 29.5 cm.), Yale  
Collection of Western  
Americana, Beinecke Rare  
Book and Manuscript Library

its defensive military posture is apparent from the architecture of its gun-turrets. And yet the number of natives loitering in its environs suggests that they found it far from uninviting. The interior view shows many more Indians than white traders, and the general impression is not of conflict or hostility or even tension but of people talking, catching up on news, and worrying less about violence than about trade.

Miller's fort is perhaps extreme in its sense of camaraderie, but even the sparse and more businesslike interior of Rudolph Friederich Kurz's *Fort Union*, circa 1852 (fig. 36), depicts a place of exchange more than a place of bloodshed.<sup>21</sup> In this, both differed from forts operated by the U. S. Army, the purely military purpose of which placed them in a more oppositional relationship to surrounding Indian communities. Alfred Sully's *Fort Snelling*, 1855 (fig. 37), with its substantial institutional appearance and its full-dress troops parading in the foreground, has an altogether more aggressive appearance than the forts in Miller's or Kurz's images. One has trouble imagining local Indians dropping by such a place of their own accord for trade or for anything else. Violence and trade were not, of course, mutually exclusive, for wherever people buy goods they also sometimes steal them. But as a record of the changing frontier landscape, this intercultural narrative moment of goods changing hands is first and foremost about people *dealing* with one another and—for good or for ill—learning one another's ways.

That is why, when we examine a painting like Edmund C. Coates's *Blockhouse, St. Regis, Canada, on the St. Lawrence*, 1849–1854 (fig. 38), we cannot avoid placing it in a larger frontier narrative. Although the scene is from eastern Canada, it retains unmistakable frontier elements. Clearly this little town, fifty or so miles upstream from Montreal, remains a place of exchange, in which people of different cultures gather from miles around to do business. The easy mingling of Indian and European traditions that could characterize such outposts is evident not just from the figures in the image but from the objects that surround them: the Indian costumes made from woven textiles, the careless mixture of native and non-native clothing styles, the Indian canoes that sit beached just below the massive wooden buildings that are hardly Indian in their architecture. Dead center in the composition is the church steeple, which suggests the noneconomic exchanges that could occur in communities like this one as well. The closely clustered buildings evidently house a sizable and rather prosperous local population, and yet the image leaves us not at all certain about the background of the people who live here: they evidently come from no single cultural tradition, and they are evidently adept at translating among the different worlds that brush up against each other at this location. What began as a simple trading post has apparently become much more. Whether one reads this image as an icon of nineteenth-century progress, as an emblem of colonial empire, or as a record of peaceful cultural coexistence, it captures a moment in the frontier narrative that endlessly repeated itself across North America.



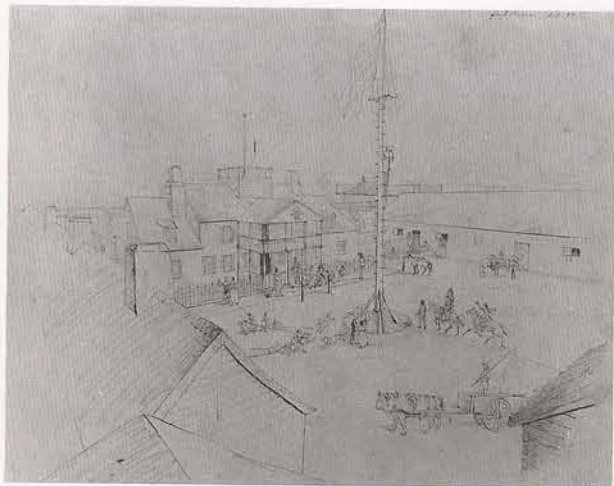


35

Alfred Jacob Miller

*Interior of Fort Laramie,*

undated, c. 1837

Watercolor, gouache, glazes,  
and graphite on paper,10 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 14 $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (27.3 x 36.8cm.), The Thomas Gilcrease  
Institute of American History  
and Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma

36

Rudolph Friederich Kurz

*Fort Union,* c. 1852Pen and ink and graphite on  
paper, 12 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 15 $\frac{3}{4}$  in.(31.8 x 40 cm.), The Thomas  
Gilcrease Institute of  
American History and Art,  
Tulsa, Oklahoma

37

Alfred Sully

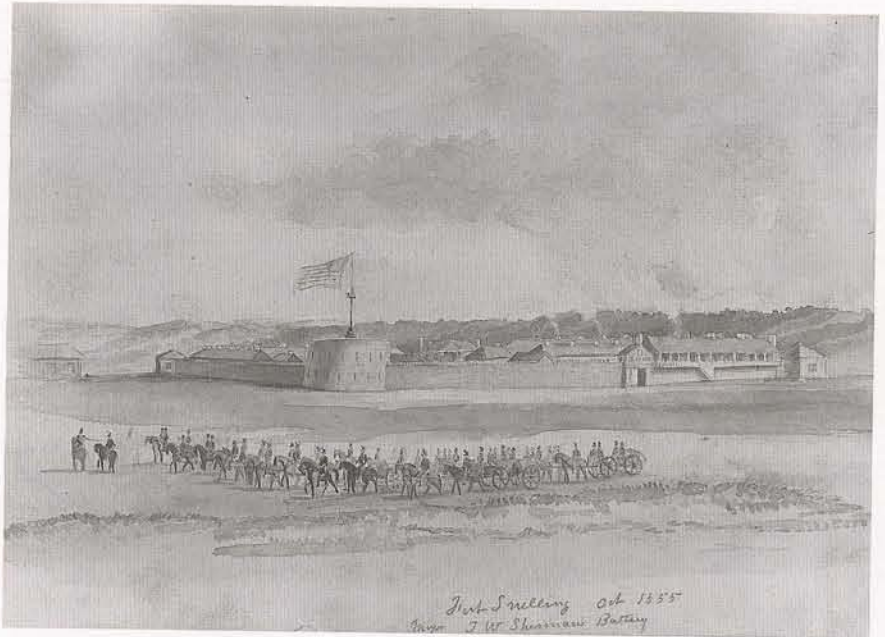
*Fort Snelling*, c. 1855

Watercolor on paper,

8 7/8 x 11 3/8 in. (21.3 x 29.5 cm.),

The Thomas Gilcrease

Institute of American History and Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma



38

Edmund C. Coates

*Blockhouse, St. Regis, Canada,*  
*on the St. Lawrence*, undated,

c. 1840

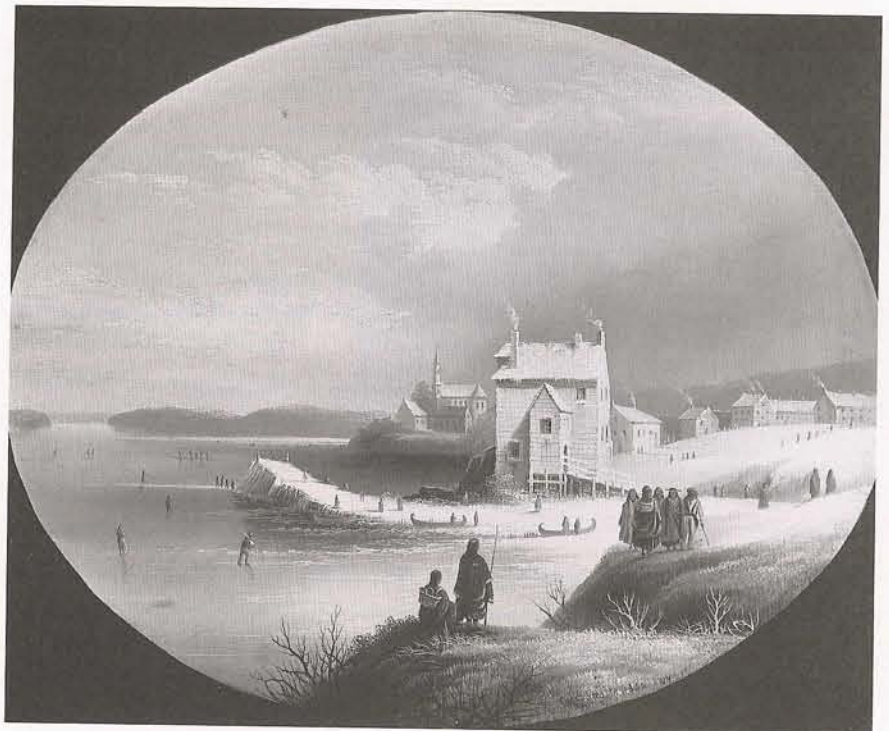
Oil on canvas, 20 x 24 in.

(50.8 x 61 cm.), The Thomas

Gilcrease Institute of

American History and Art,

Tulsa, Oklahoma



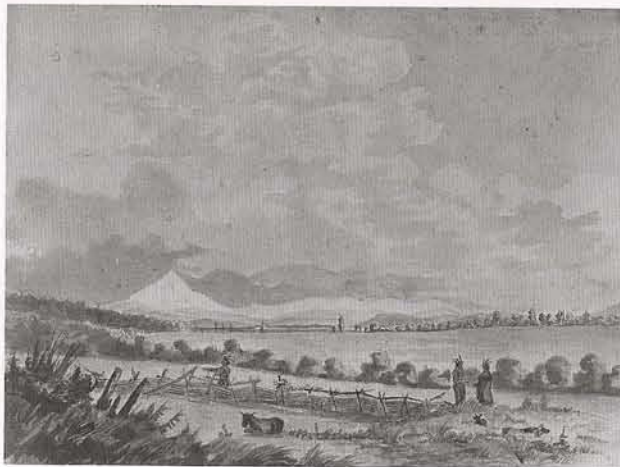
Relations of exchange between Indians and traders could persist almost indefinitely in dynamic equilibrium, as long the place of exchange—an Indian village, a rendezvous site, a fur fort—remained valuable principally as an intermediary of intercultural trade. In places where furs continued to be the most valuable natural resource—here one thinks first of the far Canadian North—the narrative of “goods changing hands” could remain the central story of the landscape for centuries. But as the church steeple in Coates’s composition suggests, points of exchange gradually acquired other functions that potentially undermined their original role. For one, they became waystations for explorers and travelers, making it far easier for outsiders to reconnoiter the terrain. That artists like Catlin, Bodmer, and Miller could paint the plains and Rockies as they did during the 1830s is proof that food, lodging, and safe travel routes had become readily available by that time. Trading posts became the nodes of an expanding transportation network that organized not just the flow of people and goods but information as well. As outsiders learned more and more about a given area, the likelihood grew that they would see additional economic possibilities in it. Growing knowledge of frontier opportunities meant new investments and new migrations, changing the character of the local population, and with it the local landscape. Even paintings might play a role in persuading immigrants to make the westward journey, by adding further color and detail to the vision that seemed to offer such promise to the searching faces in *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*.

As the possibilities of frontier areas became more widely known, many parts of North America began to attract migrants who were intent on building for themselves new lives that had little or nothing to do with intercultural trade. Their goal was to extract from the landscape its natural abundance, not by purchasing goods from native inhabitants but by working the land themselves—or by hiring such work, as the case might be. Sometimes they mined, sometimes they lumbered, but most often they farmed, particularly in the classic pastoral version of the frontier myth that appears in so much American art and literature. Here the narrative moment that painters chose to depict might be called “taming the wild” or “progress of the pastoral.” If painters of the first encounter often located their images at the start of an implicit narrative about an aboriginal world at the moment just before its decline, then painters of pastoral progress situated themselves at an equally important turning point later in the same narrative. For them, the portrayal of a transformed landscape implied the passing of a wilderness, the planting of a garden, the growth of a new civilization. The implicit narrative of such landscapes, in short, embodied nothing less than the fulfillment of a migrant’s dream—that oldest of visions in which America was the land of journey’s ending.

The visual symbolism of the pastoral moment is unmistakable. Alfred Agate’s *Hood Mountain* (fig. 39), drawn in the Oregon country in 1841, shows how an artist could deploy such symbolism even without showing us its Euroamerican authors. The

only people we see in this composition are Indians, but the countryside around them is no longer theirs. They stand beside a worm fence, that classic labor-saving device white settlers had been using since colonial times as a cheap and simple way of separating their crops from their animals. Those animals are in fact the only Euroamericans in this image: the cows that bask in the sunlight are among the most important ecological co-invaders who have accompanied those who built this fence. Their presence is proof that this Indian meadow has become an American pasture. Just below the white-capped peak in the distance, a few wooden buildings peek out from behind the trees, but even without them we know we are seeing yet another reenactment of the frontier story. We don't need to see the barns or the outbuildings or the wheatfields or the weeds to know that a pastoral transformation is taking place here. The fence and the cows are enough. Whether or not these Indians know it, an ecological revolution is taking place in their midst.

The arrival of farms in this frontier landscape was paired with the growth of towns, for they would play essential roles as markets for agricultural crops and suppliers of agricultural tools. Here the replacement of an Indian landscape by a Euroamerican one was even more obvious. Compare, for instance, two views: Joseph Drayton's *Falls of the Willamette*, drawn in 1841 (fig. 40), and John Mix Stanley's *Oregon City on the Willamette River* (fig. 41), which depicts the same location a few years later. In both images, the falls of the Willamette River serve as centerpiece for the composition, but their human and environmental context could hardly be more different. Drayton's landscape is still primarily Indian. Although missionaries had been active in the area for over half a decade, the white population of the place was miniscule. The forest still reached down to the river's edge, the boats that skimmed the water's surface were still canoes, and Indian families still gathered to fish and play along the banks.



39  
 Alfred Agate  
*Hood Mountain*, 1841  
 Watercolor on paper,  
 11¼ x 8½ in. (28.6 x 21.6 cm.),  
 The Thomas Gilcrease  
 Institute of American History  
 and Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma



40

**Joseph Drayton**  
*Falls of the Willamette, on the  
Columbia River*, undated,

c. 1841

Watercolor on paper,  
11¼ x 8½ in. (28.6 x 21.6 cm.),  
The Thomas Gilcrease  
Institute of American History  
and Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma

41

**John Mix Stanley**  
*Oregon City on the Willamette  
River*, c. 1848

Oil on canvas, 26⅞ x 39½ in.  
(66.4 x 100 cm.), Amon Carter  
Museum, Fort Worth



The wooden buildings at the right may or may not be Indian—some white settlement may have begun—but they remain marginal to the scene.

The same can hardly be said for the structures of John Mix Stanley's *Oregon City*. The forest has retreated far up the banks of the river, and a sizable town has appeared in its place. The familiar rectilinear grid so beloved of American townsite speculators has transformed this Indian country into real estate. Lining the orderly streets we see the usual icons of frontier progress: covered wagons, stores, workshops, a sawmill, a church, what local boosters undoubtedly saw as the seeds of a future great city. Even our sense of the waterfall has been subtly transformed, for the waterpower potential of the site is now unmistakable. Although that resource is as yet unexploited, no contemporary observer could have missed the significance of the falls for future industry. The subtle difference in the way these two pictures encourage us to view the falls is proof that the landscape is being transformed as much in the mind as on the ground.

Stanley's self-consciousness about the narrative in which he has situated this painting is evident from the left foreground of his composition. There, we see an icon that is repeated over and over in nineteenth-century frontier imagery: Indians witnessing a landscape of progress that also marks the end of their familiar world. Two natives stand on a foreground prominence beneath a few bedraggled trees that supply the framing for the picture as a whole. The man leans wearily upon his rifle while the woman sits at his feet, both gazing away from the town toward the viewer. Neither looks happy. The narrative implications of the composition are unmistakable, and are in fact remarkably similar to those in Cole's *Oxbow*: the wilderness of the left foreground is giving way to the new civilization of the valley. The native inhabitants who had once made their homes in that wilderness are now fading away with the forest. Their day has passed, or so the national myth would have us believe. The frontier moment of intercultural exchange, when Indians and white traders could share this landscape because they still had much to share with each other, is becoming the moment of pastoral progress, when the inhabitants of this town, and the farmers they serve in the fertile valleys upstream, no longer need what Indians once offered. From now on, any natives who appear in landscapes like this one serve only as reminders of the world they have lost. More and more, representations of pastoral progress will omit them altogether.

The farther forward one goes in the frontier narrative, the more it focuses on dramas *within* the new settlements rather than dramas *between* settlers and Indians. This is true wherever an image may be located geographically, west or east, for the essential story is national rather than regional: it is about the emergence of an *American* landscape. John W. Hill, Jr.'s *View of Tarrytown, Looking towards the Highlands*, undated (fig. 4.2), may be set along the Hudson River just a few dozen miles from New York City, but it uses the same diagonally divided composition as Stanley's *Oregon City* (and Cole's *Oxbow*) to suggest that the upland forest is giving way to a pastoral



civilization in the lowlands. Here the road that marks the progress of the countryside has already been cut far up into the hills, so that the foreground artist who records the scene for us sits not in the wilderness but by a roadside. An oxteam and a rider on horseback pass by, suggesting that this rough-hewn scar on the hillside is already an active corridor of transportation. Below, the dense growth of the natural forest gives way to the orderly plantings of orchards and shaded yards. This is civilized farming country indeed, with industry and urbanity just over the horizon. Some of the properties that stretch before us begin to deserve the label “estates” rather than mere “farms.” The work of transforming the countryside evidently goes on, but one gets the sense that those who inhabit the prosperous buildings below hardly think of themselves as living on a frontier. The narrative of national progress in this place is increasingly the story of a settled land.

A settled land: that, in fact, is the telos that directs the frontier narrative, setting these otherwise static images in motion. A contemporary observer could look at such paintings and instantly sense that the landscape and its inhabitants were racing

42

John W. Hill, Jr.

*View of Tarrytown, Looking  
towards the Highlands  
(Westside of Hudson River),*  
undated

Oil on canvas, 38 x 50 $\frac{7}{8}$  in.  
(96.5 x 127.9 cm.), The  
Thomas Gilcrease Institute of  
American History and Art,  
Tulsa, Oklahoma



45

Andrew Melrose

*Westward the Star of Empire  
Takes Its Way—near Council  
Bluffs, Iowa, 1867*

Oil on canvas, 25½ x 46 in.  
(64.8 x 116.8 cm.), Collection  
E. William Judson

through time toward their appointed destiny. One of the most remarkable examples of this prophetic quality in nineteenth-century landscape art is Andrew Melrose's *Westward the Star of Empire Takes Its Way—Near Council Bluffs, Iowa*, 1867 (fig. 43), which was commissioned to celebrate the arrival of the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad at the Missouri River. The painting offers a veritable catalog of frontier pastoral symbols, packing so many onto one canvas that the image threatens to drift into surrealism or cliché. And yet for a nineteenth-century viewer, the self-conscious artifice of this composition was vividly evocative, suggesting that the landscape was pregnant with the promise of progress. On the left side of the painting, glowing in the low light of a rising or setting sun, is the recently constructed log cabin of a young immigrant family. The husband, wife, and children stand proudly in front of their new home. Milch cows graze to one side while laundry hangs between two trees near the house, lending the scene an almost defiantly domestic air. All around the house are stumps, which for a contemporary viewer betokened many things: the clearing of the forest, the coming of the plow, the planting of new crops—in short, the emergence of a pastoral landscape.

But that is only part of the story this painting has to tell. As the pioneer family gazes in wonder across the newly cleared field, a locomotive, its smokestack ablaze with red cinders and its headlight piercing the dusk like a star, speeds along tracks that carry it directly toward the viewer. Deer, startled by the sudden light, dash across the tracks only to discover their familiar forest home transformed by the work of the



ax. This painting, too, bears a curious but striking similarity to Cole's *Oxbow*: on one side of its diagonal dividing line the scenery is pastoral, on the other, sublime. But the sublimity of the wild woodland has been usurped by the sublimity of the locomotive, that magical transforming force of human technology which promises a far different future for those who hear the scream of its passing whistle.

Several strands of the frontier narrative are woven into this image. The retreat of the wilderness is captured by the stumps, the remnant trees that still line the railroad right-of-way, and the startled movements of the deer. The old American story of pioneers cutting clearings in the forest supplies the classic pastoral icon of a Jeffersonian landscape where yeoman farmers work their own land, raise their families, and lay the foundations for republican democracy in a transformed countryside. And the locomotive suggests that frontier places like this one have suddenly lost their remoteness, so that the fate of this hardworking family will now depend not just on its own labor, but on its new technological ties to the outside world. The rails that shine so brightly in the light of the oncoming locomotive point forward toward the cutting edge of frontier settlement, and backward toward the metropolitan world that has sent them forth. By shuttling between West and East, between frontier and metropolis, between this family and the great markets of Chicago, New York, and London, the railroad knits together the American landscape. It makes far things near, and accelerates the rate at which the pioneer countryside will be transformed. Therein lies the prophecy: the settledness and prosperity of Hill's Tarrytown will soon come to this Iowa prairie as well.<sup>22</sup>

The greatest nineteenth-century representations of the prophetic frontier landscape are those of the Hudson River School. Most are set in the East, but in the eyes of contemporaries they offered a vision for the entire nation. Sanford Gifford's *Twilight on Hunter Mountain*, 1866 (Private Collection), Jasper Cropsey's *Autumn—On the Hudson River*, 1860 (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.), Asher Durand's *Progress*, 1853 (Warner Collection of Gulf States Paper Corporation, Tuscaloosa); each seeks to capture in a static image the dynamics of a progressive countryside. One of the best-known of these paintings is Frederic Edwin Church's *Mount Ktaadn*, 1853 (fig. 44), which is all the more striking because the landscape it depicts is almost a complete fantasy.<sup>23</sup> The great Maine mountain where Henry David Thoreau had just experienced his sublime encounter with the cloud factory is real enough, but the foreground is like nothing Thoreau could have seen on his travels. Instead, it borrows familiar romantic elements—the framing vegetation, the idling foreground figure, the grazing cattle, the water in the middle distance, and the sublime wilderness behind—to prophesy that even Ktaadn will eventually be absorbed into America's pastoral future.

The boy who gazes at the view from beneath the elm and the oak—neither of which tree is native to Maine—sees with his mind's eye where this landscape is headed. The



44  
Frederic Edwin Church  
*Mount Katahdin*, 1853  
Oil on canvas,  $36\frac{1}{4} \times 55\frac{1}{4}$  in.  
(92.1 x 140.3 cm.), Yale  
University Art Gallery, Stanley  
B. Resor, B.A. 1901, Fund

road with its well-made bridge and carriage suggest the existence of unseen farms that will soon send their crops and cattle along this route to market. The imposing mill with its waterfall cascading down from the millpond to the lake below suggests that not just farms but factories have begun to appear here. Like the boy, Church at this early stage in his career seems undisturbed by these transformations, as if pastoral foreground and sublime background could exist forever in delicate balance. He thus defines an additional, closing moment in the frontier story. Just as it is possible in Alfred Jacob Miller's fur trade paintings to imagine that trappers and Indians might share their Edenic landscape forever, so it seems in paintings like this one that the pastoral middle landscape could continue indefinitely, combining the virtues of sublime nature, yeoman agriculture, nascent industry, and republican democracy to the mutual benefit of all. We can call this climactic narrative moment "the prophecy fulfilled," "the wilderness civilized," or, most simply, "the new land settled."

The essential optimism of the frontier narrative, its enthusiastic embrace of the epic American effort to transform the national landscape, is nowhere more obvious than here, but it informs virtually all the paintings examined thus far. The prophecy of progress fulfilled could in fact extend well beyond the pastoral to include landscapes far more industrial, and communities far less Jeffersonian, than these. In George Inness's remarkable *Lackawanna Valley*, 1855 (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.), for instance, the idling foreground figure beneath the Claudian tree looks down across a pasture to a steaming locomotive and railroad roundhouse with no sense that the forces of progress might ever threaten this harmony. In his *Starrucca Viaduct, Pennsylvania*, 1865 (Toledo Museum of Art), Jasper Cropsey centers a heroic feat of railroad engineering in his composition without disturbing the pastoral middle landscape of the valley or the gentle sublimity of mountains that are ablaze with autumn colors. Joseph Becker's *Snow Sheds on the Central Pacific Railroad in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, May 1869*, 1869 (fig. 45), includes a few stumps that hint at the thousands of trees that have been felled to bring a locomotive this high into the California mountains, but the cheering Chinese workers in the foreground suggest that no one—not even the laborers who have suffered the most to bring this landscape into being—sees it as anything other than a remarkable human achievement. The Chinese workers in Thomas Hill's *Irrigating at Strawberry Farm*, circa 1865 (fig. 46), seem no less content with their lot, even though the image bespeaks not just a profound environmental transformation of a dry California valley but an equally profound social reorganization of the American yeoman myth. White and Asian agricultural laborers follow the instructions of a farmer whose bourgeois clothing, managerial stance, and lordly estate are a far cry from the humble log cabin of Melrose's Iowa farm family. And yet despite the emerging tensions that our twentieth-century eyes might detect in such images, their authors display no ambivalence about offering them as exemplars in the artistic narrative of pastoral progress.

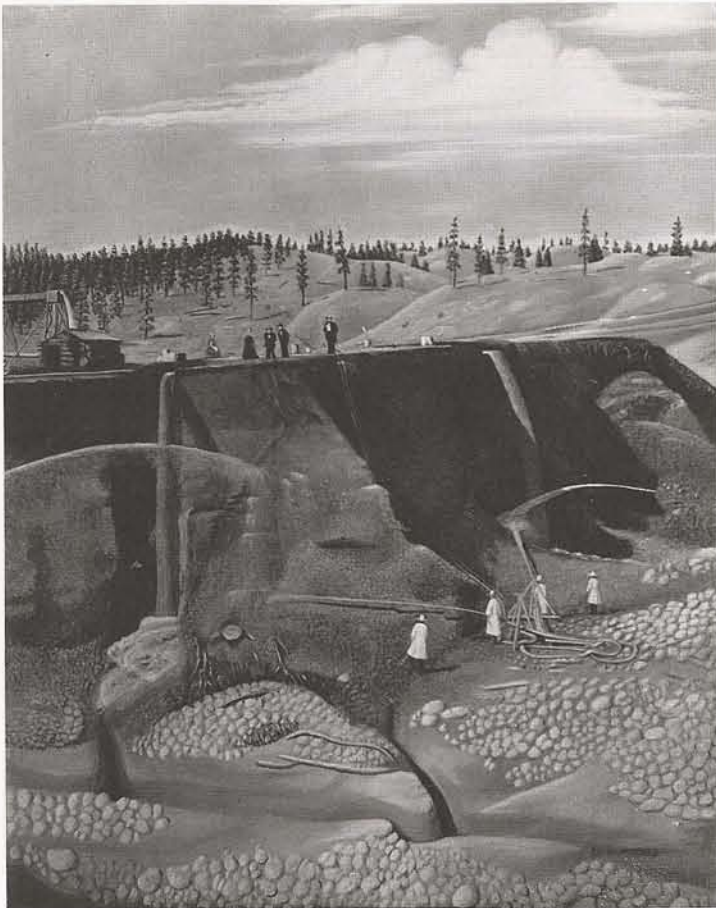
45  
Joseph Hubert Becker  
*Snow Sheds on the Central  
Pacific Railroad in the Sierra  
Nevada Mountains*, undated,  
c. 1869  
Oil on canvas, 19 x 26 in.  
(48.3 x 66 cm.), The Thomas  
Gilcrease Institute of  
American History and Art,  
Tulsa, Oklahoma



46  
Thomas Hill  
*Irrigating at Strawberry Farm*,  
c. 1865  
Oil on board, 12½ x 19 in.  
(31.8 x 48.3 cm.), Courtesy  
Bancroft Library

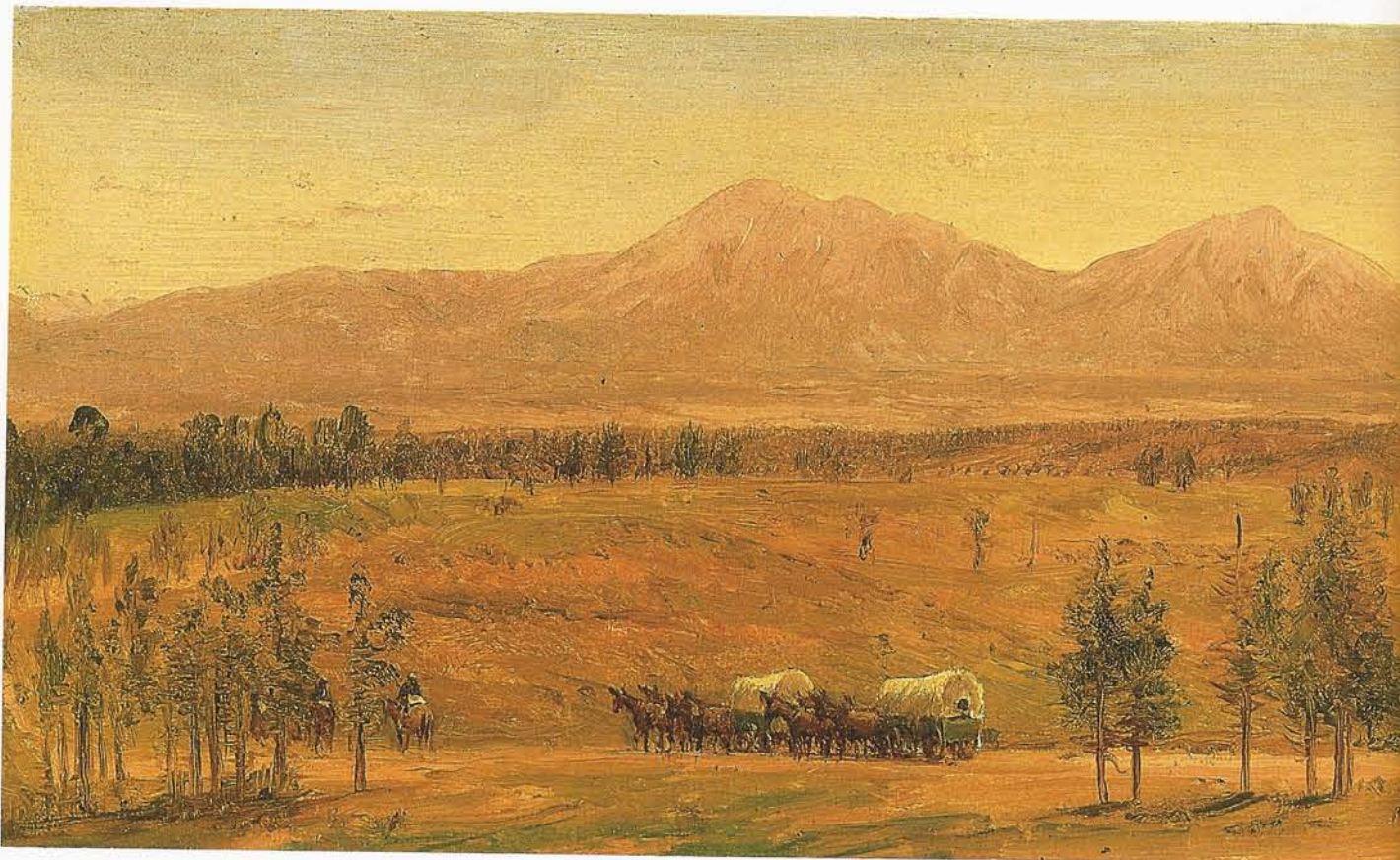


We, of course, cannot be so wholehearted in our optimism. When we look at a painting like Mrs. Jonas W. Brown's *Mining in the Boise Basin in the Early Seventies*, circa 1870–1880 (fig. 47), it is hard to avoid seeing a ravaged landscape. The over-coated men directing high-pressure blasts of water at this Idaho hillside are gradually eating the very earth away. To our eyes this is apt to look like environmental destruction, but we cannot be at all sure that the observers who look down on this scene in the painting see it as we do. For them, the contrast between the green hills above and the brown earth below may have been equally great, but each in its own way might still have been beautiful. That Margaretta Brown would choose this image to adorn a mural at the Masonic Temple in Idaho City suggests that neither she nor the people who commissioned her saw this transformed landscape as a badge of dishonor. While not exactly pastoral, it too could betoken the growing wealth of a community and the progress of American civilization.



47

Margaretta Favorite Brown  
*Mining in the Boise Basin in  
the Early Seventies*, c. 1870–1880  
Oil on canvas, 27 x 21 in.  
(68.6 x 53.3 cm.), Idaho State  
Historical Society, no. 349



48

Thomas Worthington  
Whittredge

*Spanish Peaks from Raton  
Pass*, 1866

Oil on paper laid down on  
canvas, 7 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 23 $\frac{1}{4}$  in.

(18.1 x 59.1 cm.), Yale

University Art Gallery, Gift

from the Estate of William W.

Farnam, B.A. 1866, M.A.

1869, to the Peabody Museum  
of Natural History

But progress is not the end of the story. The very ambivalence we feel about a painting like Brown's suggests a counternarrative in which what we sacrifice to progress is at least as valuable as what we gain. By this reading, the heroic epic of nineteenth-century Americans transforming the environment to produce their national landscape contains a bittersweet undercurrent of tragedy or loss. The power of the frontier narrative had been to suggest that the American landscape was constantly in motion, so that every scene—from first encounter, to intercultural trade, to pastoral progress, to fulfilled civilization—had prophetic meaning. Even so seemingly straightforward a painting as Thomas Worthington Whittredge's *Spanish Peaks from Raton Pass*, 1866 (fig. 48), with its riders and covered wagons crossing a desert landscape beneath a pair of mountain peaks, gained force from the larger frontier story. Like a thousand other such images, it could take for its subject not just a static landscape but a dynamic narrative of heroic people occupying that landscape, making it



their own, and building a new nation in the process. Most of all, the frontier narrative was about the glory of movement and change, of ordinary people making history by the mere act of living their ordinary lives. And therein lay its paradox, for if the story drew its deepest meaning from movement, then the end of the journey—when movement stopped—could take away what had made the journey seem so attractive in the first place. The frontier narrative was about settling a new land; it offered little wisdom about how best to live once the settling was done and the new land had become old.

Frederick Jackson Turner understood this paradox when he announced the closing of the frontier in his famous essay of 1893. “He would be a rash prophet,” he said, “who should assert that the expansive character of American life has now entirely ceased. Movement has been its dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exer-

cise. But never again will such gifts of free land offer themselves. . . . Four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history."<sup>24</sup> This notion that the frontier would close and disappear forever would later be criticized for imposing an artificial break between the West of the nineteenth century and the West of the twentieth. But the closing of the frontier was not Turner's invention. It was an inescapable consequence of the frontier narrative itself, and had been part of the story Americans had been telling themselves long before Turner wrote his essay. If early American prophets had predicted that their nation's future would be about settling the wilderness, then later American historians could hardly avoid seeing a profound turning point in their nation's past when the settling seemed finally done.

That is why, despite the enthusiasm and optimism that characterize American landscape paintings of the nineteenth century, we can detect in many that undercurrent of regret about the passing of an earlier world. We see it in George Catlin's and Karl Bodmer's efforts to suppress signs of white influence in their Indian subjects. It is present in the sad faces of the two natives who sit above John Mix Stanley's *Oregon City*. It dominates the later work of Frederic Edwin Church, when the balanced middle landscape of *Mount Katahdin* seems less beautiful than the mountain lake untouched by any human presence in *Twilight in the Wilderness*, 1860 (Cleveland Museum of Art). Although *Twilight in the Wilderness* is a composite creation of the artist's, Church undoubtedly constructed it from scenes he had recorded during repeated trips to Maine during the 1850s. Where the artist in 1853 had felt compelled to create a pastoral human foreground for what he saw in Maine, by 1860 he had suppressed all signs of people to depict a sublime wilderness world where night would soon fall forever.

*Twilight in the Wilderness* takes its meaning from the same frontier narrative as all the other nineteenth-century landscapes we have seen, but it does so by turning that narrative on its head. Church here retreats from his earlier optimism about pastoral progress. Instead, the value of this scene is precisely that it has *escaped* progress: the frontier story has not yet begun here, so the sublime beauty of wild nature remains unhurt by profane human hands. Perhaps not too surprisingly, wilderness depictions like this one become more common in the second half of the nineteenth century. Church's later paintings, along with the western landscapes of such artists as Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran, depict idealized worlds similar to the ones recorded in Catlin's and Bodmer's paintings of plains Indians. These artists apparently situate us at a narrative moment just before the incursions of an alien world threaten to undermine the sublimity that stretches before us. Sometimes the artist includes Indians to locate the wilderness in history; we see this, for instance, in Thomas Cole's *North Mountain and Catskill Creek*, 1838 (Yale University Art Gallery), and Albert

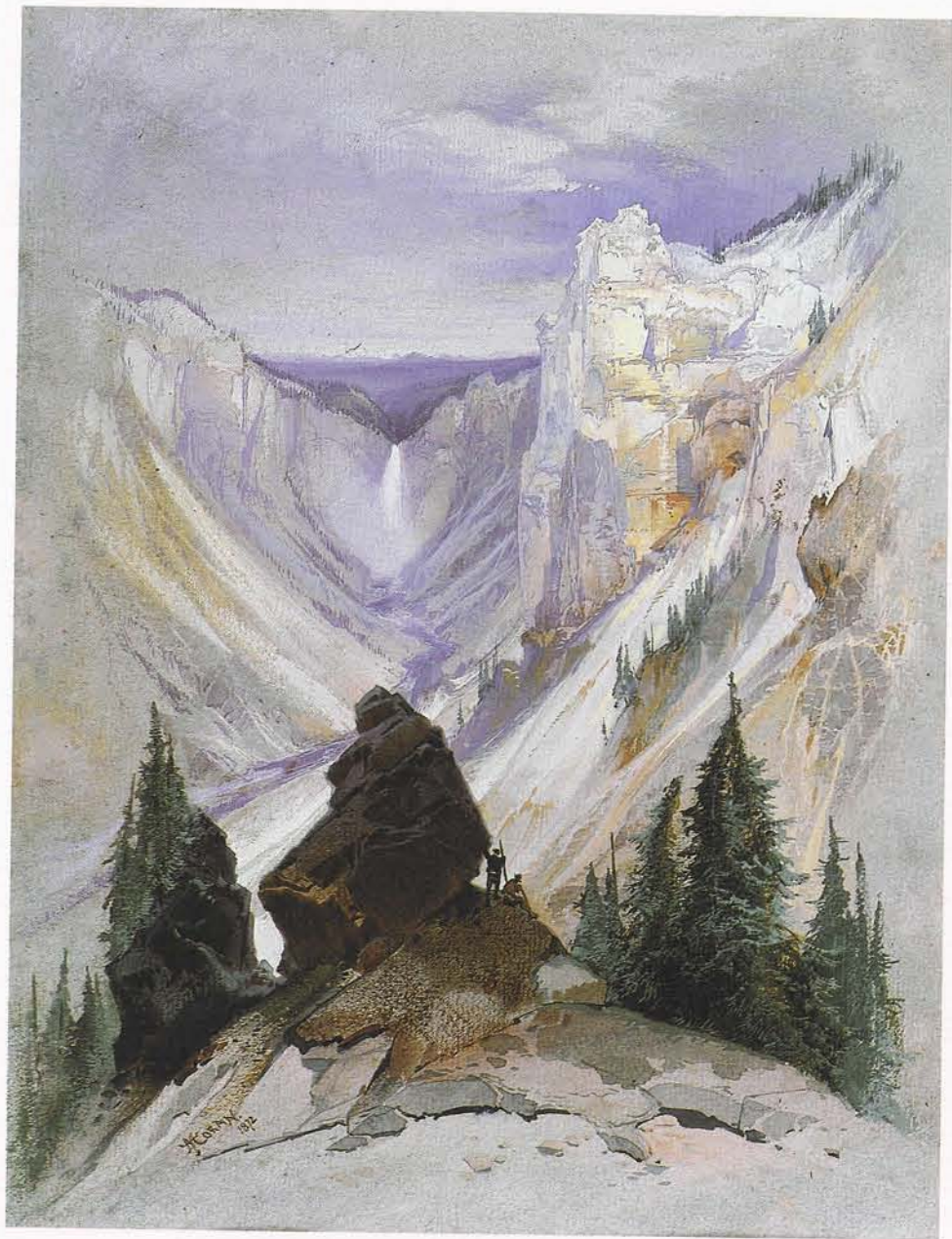


Bierstadt's *Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak*, 1863 (see fig. 6). But in the second half of the nineteenth century, wilderness images more and more follow Church in suppressing any sign of human presence. Moran's *Acoma*, 1904 (Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, Tulsa), places its Indian subjects so much in the distance that the scene seems far more wild than human. Bierstadt's *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California*, 1868 (see fig. 9), and Moran's *Tower Falls*, 1872 (Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, Tulsa), include no people at all. They carry us backward not to a prefrontier Indian landscape, but to a prehuman wilderness one, fresh in the morning of God's creation. They move us out of history and into myth.<sup>25</sup>

In this willful erasure of Indians and whites alike, we see the historical invention of the depopulated sacred places that would emerge as the national parks and wilderness areas we know today. The apparently prehuman wilderness of these paintings is in fact a *post*-frontier landscape, a product of the very frontier process it seeks to erase, set at a narrative moment when at least some Americans had begun to wonder whether all parts of the nation should be destined for development. It is no accident that paintings like these became increasingly common just as Indians were losing control of their land. With their forced removal onto reservations, it began to be possible to visit western landscapes without observing the daily use Indians had once made of them. Then, too, Indian removal made it easier to forget the threat of violence that had earlier characterized frontier areas for Indians and whites alike.

Increasingly, the figures who appear in wilderness paintings are neither Indians nor white frontierspeople but tourists, people whose only relation to the landscape is to look at and admire its beauty without altering it. A pair of such figures are captured in silhouette beside the central boulder in Moran's watercolor *Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone*, 1872 (fig. 49). One has only to compare them with the gun-toting men in Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait's *American Frontier Life (Trapper Retreating over River)*, 1852 (see fig. 89), to see how remote from frontier history the sublime landscape has become. Tait's travelers (and even their horse) are clearly frightened by the wilderness around them, for they are still very much in the midst of a frontier narrative that is full of change and conflict. Moran's travelers have no such fears. Their attitude of reverie is directly akin to that of the boy in Church's *Mount Ktaadn*, and all the other idling figures who occupy the foregrounds of so many romantic landscape paintings. Not only do they see the canyon before them with romantic eyes; in the very act of doing so, they record their passage into a postfrontier world. It will not be long before the people viewing this western wilderness will be unmistakable representatives of a well-to-do leisure class in temporary retreat from their urban homes. As the frontier recedes, the wilderness ceases to be either an opportunity for progress or an occasion for terror. Instead, it becomes scenery.

Retrospective frontier painting exploded in the late nineteenth and early twen-

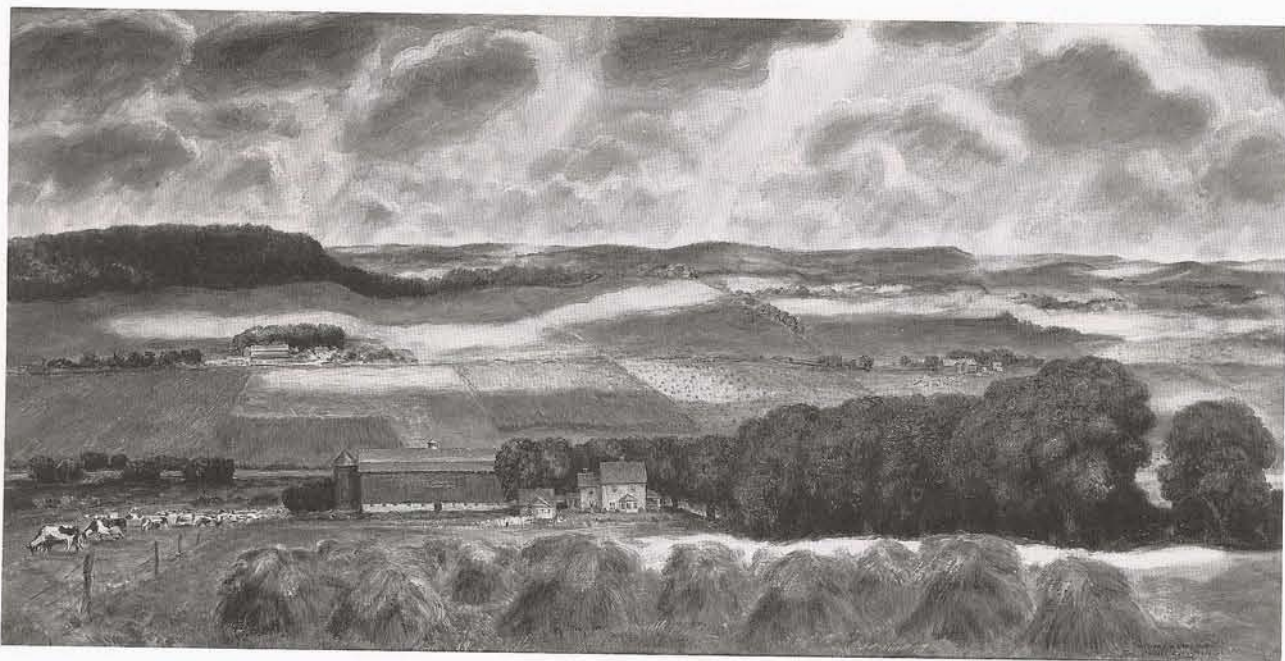


49  
Thomas Moran  
*The Grand Canyon of the  
Yellowstone, 1872*  
Watercolor and graphite on  
paper, 11¼ x 8 in.  
(28.6 x 20.3 cm.), The Thomas  
Gilcrease Institute of  
American History and Art,  
Tulsa, Oklahoma

tieth centuries with Frederic Remington and Charles M. Russell being only the best known of the dozens of artists who lovingly depicted heroic scenes of cowboys and rough riders working to subdue the Wild West. But although these paintings obviously participate in the frontier narrative, endlessly recapitulating it for a modern audience, their stylized nostalgia clearly marks them as postfrontier works of art. They all look backward to a lost world and way of life. Moreover, the changing landscape of America ceases to be the subject of such artworks; the landscapes they record become mythically schematized, mere backdrops for the human heroes in the foreground. As records of environmental change and what Americans thought about it, they offer little.

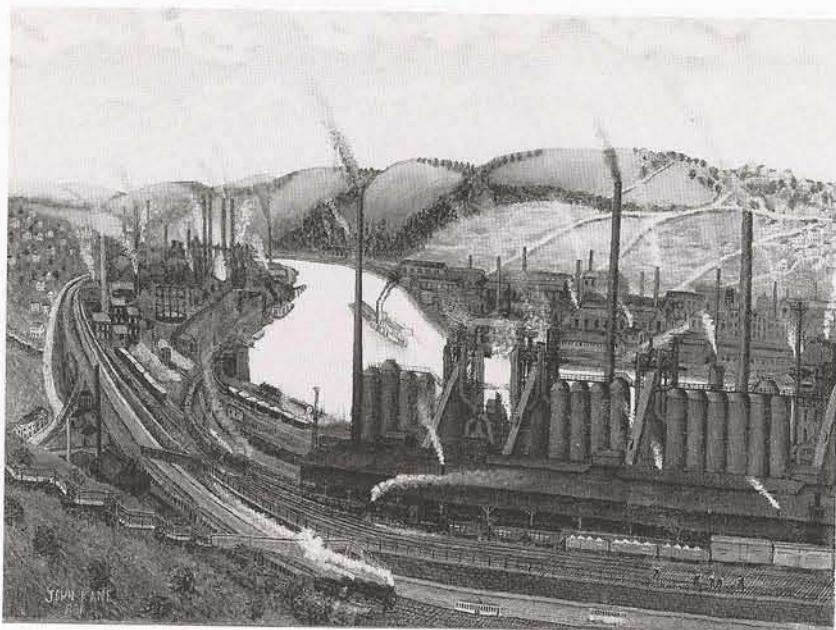
Landscape art of course continues in the twentieth century, developing along widely diverging lines. A number of earlier traditions inevitably persist. The regionalist murals of Thomas Hart Benton in many ways trace the entire frontier narrative in their efforts to celebrate America's epic past.<sup>26</sup> John Steuart Curry's magnificent *Wisconsin Landscape*, 1938–1939 (fig. 50), suggests the continuing vigor of the pastoral genre, albeit without much sense that the work of environmental transformation goes on: this midwestern countryside seems well past the frontier, a fully settled land. John Kane's equally powerful *Monongahela Valley*, 1931 (fig. 51), embraces an industrial landscape as enthusiastically as Curry does a pastoral one, and with much the same sense of an environmental transformation that is already complete. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the depopulated, sublime wilderness art of the late nineteenth-century romantics has continued unabated in wilderness photography, most notably that of Ansel Adams. In Adams's work, the millions of tourists who visit the national parks are carefully expunged to produce images that conform to the myth of a pre-human wilderness, with the ironic effect of thereby encouraging still more millions to visit these unpeopled wonders for themselves. In spite of their prefrontier appearance, such images betray a profoundly postfrontier consciousness. The same can be said of Alexandre Hogue, whose Dust Bowl symbolism about the environmental damage of American settlement is almost pornographically blatant.<sup>27</sup> His *Mother Earth Laid Bare*, 1938 (fig. 52), for instance, discovers a nude female figure in the eroded gullies of an abandoned Great Plains farm. In front of this raped figure he places an all too phallic plow, thereby turning the traditional symbol of pastoral progress into a demonic instrument. In very different ways, each of these artists finds frontier echoes in their work.

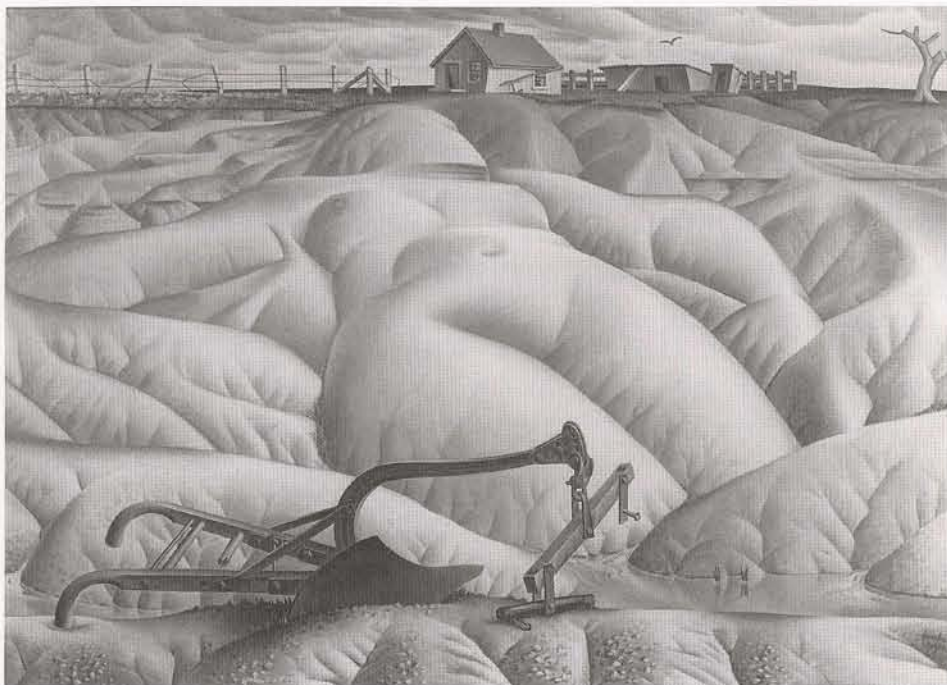
But most twentieth-century artists have simply ignored frontier symbolism in depicting local landscapes. Painters have generally ceded the strict representation of wild nature to the camera, turning instead toward impressionist, expressionist, formalist, and regionalist versions of landscape art.<sup>28</sup> Georgia O'Keeffe's *Bob's Steer Head*, 1936 (fig. 53), for instance, with its stark white skull set like an abstract design against the gentle earth tones of an adobe wall, has a haunting beauty that deserves



50  
 John Steuart Curry  
*Wisconsin Landscape*,  
 1938–1939  
 Oil on canvas, 42 x 84 in.  
 (106.7 x 213.4 cm.), Copyright  
 © By the Metropolitan  
 Museum of Art; The  
 Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
 New York, George A. Hearn  
 Fund, 1942

51  
 John Kane  
*Monongahela Valley*, 1931  
 Oil on canvas, 28 x 34¼ in.  
 (71.1 x 87 cm.), Copyright © By  
 the Metropolitan Museum of  
 Art; The Metropolitan  
 Museum of Art, New York,  
 Bequest of Miss Adelaide  
 Milton de Groot (1876–1967),  
 1967





52

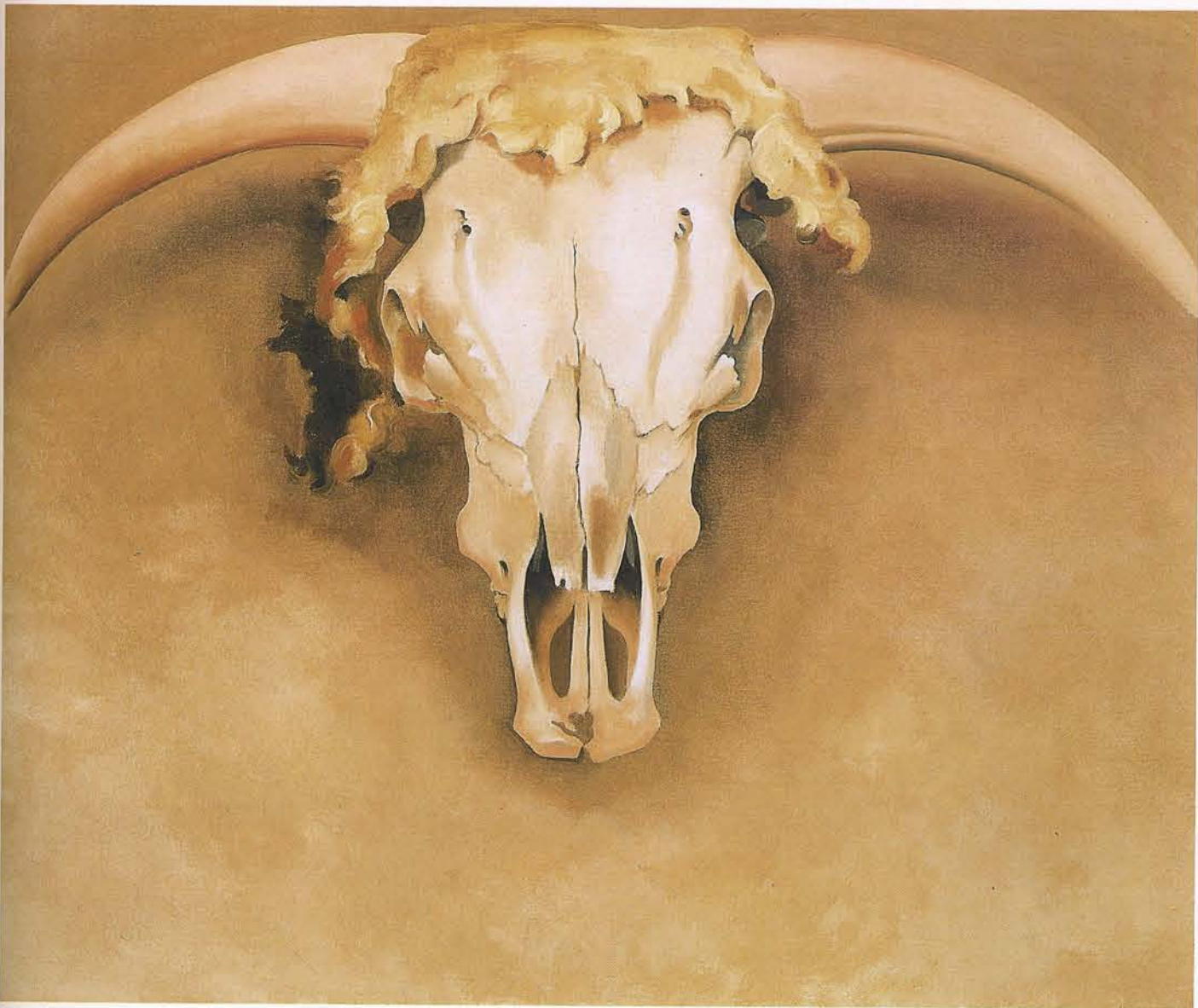
Alexandre Hogue  
*Erosion No. 2. Mother Earth  
 Laid Bare*, 1938  
 Oil on canvas, 44 x 56 in.  
 (111.8 x 142.2 cm.), The  
 Philbrook Museum of Art,  
 Tulsa, Oklahoma

long contemplation in its own right. Her *Red and Yellow Cliffs*, 1940 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), with its sensuous bands of color on a heavily eroded southwestern hillside, is no less compelling a meditation on the form and power of landscape. But the *story* of these images is inscrutable. As with so many other twentieth-century landscapes, one cannot identify a single overarching narrative into which they fit, and they do not readily yield any obvious insight into the human meaning of a particular place. Their power flows from their formal abstraction of nature and their isolation from a larger historical or environmental context.

Such was not the case with earlier American landscapes. Especially during the middle decades of the nineteenth century—from the 1820s, when Thomas Cole first journeyed up the Hudson, to the 1860s and 1870s, when Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran wandered the Rocky Mountain West—the frontier narrative was so compelling that few painters could escape its influence.<sup>29</sup> Not only did artists record on canvas Americans' most dearly held beliefs about the meaning of national progress; they discovered those meanings embedded right in the landscape itself. A newly discovered geological formation, a gathering of Indians and traders in a mountain valley, a stump in a cleared field, a steaming locomotive, a newly settled town, a quiet wilderness lake: each represented landscapes of change that were also chapters in the epic of a great nation.

The story they told was by no means all positive. Many frontier prophecies became self-fulfilling only by acts of violence and oppression that imposed on disempowered people and places the marginal roles they had been assigned in the march of progress. The vanishing Indian, the conquered prairie, the disappearing herd, the retreating forest: each had a part in the frontier script, but the meaning of each could shift dramatically depending on who was describing its fate. Many environments, to say nothing of their earlier inhabitants, did not easily conform to the changes that frontier migrants sought to impose on them; at least a few managed to resist the onslaught of progress in surprising ways. Even the victors were not always at ease with the triumphant stories they told. Some who had embraced the national vision of progress later regretted its effects. Some lamented the lost world of the frontier, feeling that a fully settled America could never again know the glory of its heroic early years. Others fell in love with the very wilderness that the original frontier narrative had sought to transform.

But about the historical significance of that narrative there can be no doubt: it remains among the key founding myths of the United States and is inscribed virtually everywhere on the American landscape. Whether one climbs the crest of the Sierras to look down with Emanuel Leutze on the golden promise of California or sits with Thomas Cole atop a mountain in Massachusetts to contemplate the boundary between sublime wilderness and pastoral civilization, one cannot help recognizing that for these earlier Americans the landscape itself was a compelling creation. It was at once their greatest achievement and the truest record of their collective past. Every stroke of the brush, like every chop of the ax and every turn of the plow, recorded a history of human struggles and dreams that mingled with the very soil. The epic narrative that makes these paintings seem like so many chapters in a single great book is one we no longer share so easily, but the world we inhabit is its legacy, shaped as much by these paintings as by the ax and plow. Together, they forever transformed the American earth, making its story our own.



53  
Georgia O'Keeffe  
*Bob's Steer Head*, 1936  
Oil on canvas, 30 x 36 in.  
(76.2 x 91.4 cm.), Yale  
University Art Gallery, Gift of  
Arthur Milliken, B.A. 1926