THE WEST AS AMERICA, REINTERPRETING IMAGES OF THE FRONTIER, 1820–1920; edited by William H. Truettner. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991. 392 pages, color plates, black and white prints, bibliography, index, $60, clothbound.

Reviewed by Jane C. Loeffler

The sky that looks partly sunny to one person looks partly cloudy to another. Such divergent ways of reading the same situation are not unlike the two interpretations that critics have brought to the art of the American West. One interpretation tends to see the painting and photography of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century as statements of hope and opportunity, as expressions of pride in the discovery, exploration, and settlement of America's western territory. Another interpretation is reflected in *The West as America,* published in connection with the recent exhibition of the same name at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art (NMAA). In this collection of essays, art historians and historians find in this art statements of despair, lost opportunities, and collective guilt about the conquest, exploitation, and abuse of the same territory.

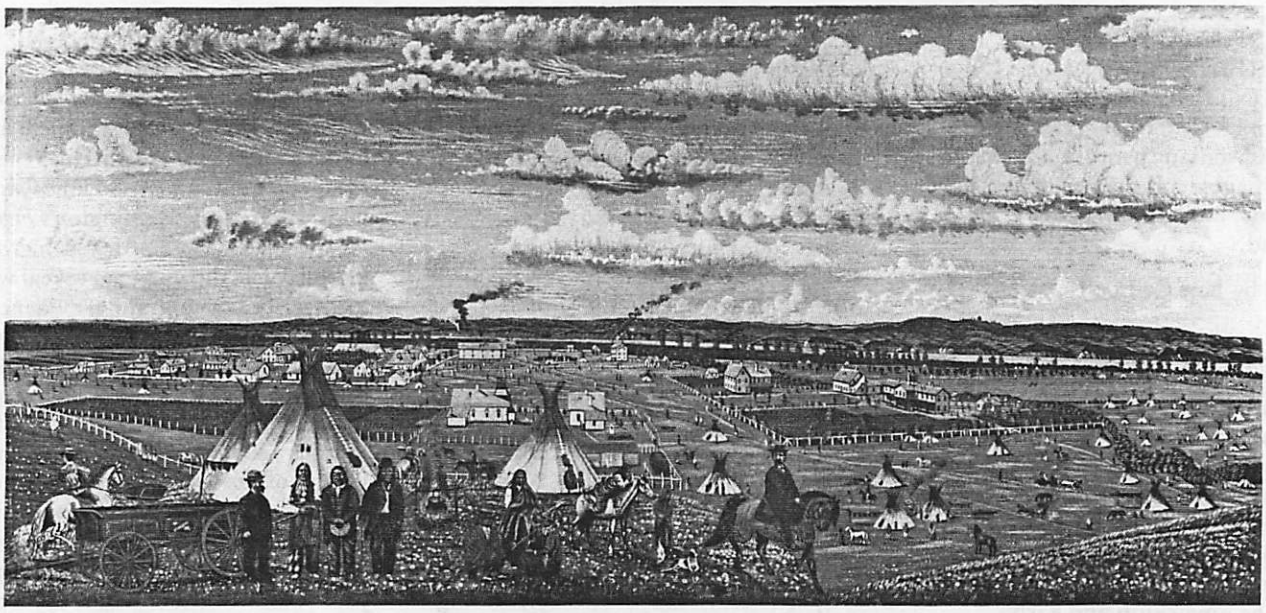
This volume's focus is what one contributor, Yale historian Howard Lamar, calls the "dark side" of American expansion. It emphasizes how artists consciously and also unconsciously misrepresented "facts" in order to glorify the rightness of national growth and to justify policies that made that growth possible. The essays, collected and edited by NMAA curator William Truettner, present a provocative thesis that leads us to ask important, if also disturbing, questions. In alerting viewers to the ways that artists contribute to the production and dissemination of myth, the essays are particularly effective. In examining and evaluating the artistic evidence only to support the stated thesis, however, they present a peculiarly distorted scholarship and overlook much of what continues to give these objects lasting value.

The essay authors are preoccupied with what artists have omitted from their paintings and, by extension, with what patrons did not want to see. Thus the setting, the landscape itself, or what we *do* see, receives little attention in the essays. But in their paintings, artists such as Bierstadt, Bromley, Remington, Tirrell, and Church do provide a wide range of useful and interesting landscape information. Those who have visited Muir Woods outside of San Francisco, for example, will appreciate how well Albert Bierstadt captures the darkness of the moist forest environment and the special quality of its filtered light in *Giant Redwood Trees of California* (1874). Valentine Walter Bromley's *Crow Indian Burial* (1876) is cited by Julie Schimmel in her essay, "Inventing 'The Indian,'" as evidence of a doomed Indian culture. A scene about death, to be sure, it is also about the nearness but inaccessibility of precious water, and about a landscape that is intrinsically hostile, not just hostile as a result of intrusion. It is about the colors of the desert, colors new to those most familiar with an Eastern palette of green, brown, and blue. Here, pink, ochre, rust, gray, and purple reflect, almost like water, the purple sky and golden light of the sunset, which Schimmel describes as "lurid," presumably because it silhouettes a "doomed" Indian village. As with the paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe, we may find this scene disturbing for its starkness and for its subject, but truly it does capture the quality of that surreal landscape.

In Frederic Remington's *Fight for the Water Hole* (1903), Alex Nemerov deconstructs the image to reveal what he describes as subliminal evidence of the artist's ideological preoccupation with prejudice and exploitation. But this painting, too, provides landscape information valuable to knowing the West as a place. The most apparent feature of this terrain is its bleak horizontal quality. Anyone who has driven across this region will instantly recognize the long, horizontal bands of pink, yellow, and blue that define the landscape and the shimmering, hot light that produces optical distortion and mirage in the middle ground. But is Remington's work really anything more than informational? Is it art or is it illustration? Art historians have long used formal analysis to study, explain, and justify examples of torture and mutilation in, for example, crucifixion scenes. Is Nemerov's essay "self-reflective" art history or is it parody? Readers will have to judge for themselves.

If the authors of this volume do not focus on the qualities of place apparent in the paintings, they do find in them ample evidence to support the exploitation thesis. Examples of how authors have stretched interpretations to fit the thesis abound, and there are enough errors to make readers wary. The photographer Carleton Watkins, for instance, did not work first in San Francisco as a shopkeeper, but in Sacramento as a clerk. Schimmel's statement that William Fuller shows Indian settlements banished to "the outskirts of town" in *Crow Creek Agency, Dakota Territory* (1884) is belied by the painting itself, which appears to show Indian settlement throughout the area.

Even more worrisome, perhaps, is Truettner's comment on Emanuel Leutze, an artist who depicted child sacrifice as part of a scene of Aztec life. Truettner blasts Leutze for "historical adjustment," claiming that Aztecs "rarely sacrificed" children, and when



William Fuller—*Crow Creek Agency, Dakota Territory,* 1884. Oil on canvas, 24⅝ × 51⅛". Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas. Image courtesy of National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.

they did, he says, it was "only in times of drought." He goes on to note that "young male adults were the usual victims." Such spurious arguments must not pass unchallenged. As the people of Milwaukee know too well, savages are not always noble.

Implicit in the viewpoint expressed in these essays is the notion that things were somehow more perfect before the West became part of an industrialized nation and that this episode of history is somehow uniquely American. Some of the anguish genuinely felt by these scholars can be traced, I believe, to the fact that they are troubled by the idea that a democracy had to or chose to expand itself via armed conquest. But it was an act of intrusion that brought democratic government to these shores in the first place. Perhaps, one could further argue, the entire continent was more perfect before the arrival of European settlers. But some of those settlers were themselves "doomed" in their homelands. Had they been unable to settle these shores, how would *they* have fared? All along the way, history is a story of someone's gain becoming someone else's loss, or vice versa.

If this saga is placed in the context of world history, it becomes apparent that history is one long saga of conquest, control, conversion, removal, consolidation, decline, and reconquest. Troubling though it is, this is nothing uniquely American. The Inquisition and reconquest of Spain by a Catholic monarchy that forcibly converted or expelled its entire Jewish population in 1492 is but one event of similar cruelty. Forced religious conversion is a form of violence that is hardly noted in this book. It is possible that attempts by settlers and later by missionaries to convert the Indians did more to threaten their culture than did efforts to change their outward dress or lifestyle.

The myth-making that typified the American experience was actually paralleled by similar events in Europe as people sought to define national identities through art and literature that greatly influenced politics. The Kalevala, published in 1835, was a creation myth used to unite Finns with themes of a common folk heritage, for example. Out of such myths grew the National Romantic, Jugendstil, Art Nouveau, and other *fin de siècle* artistic movements that provide a context for the consideration of George Willoughby Maynard's vision of *Civilization* (1893), cited, it seems, as an American phenomenon by Patricia Hills.

What is uniquely American about this art is not the myth-making but the landscape itself. Through paintings and widely distributed prints and photographs, an audience of Americans came to know parts of the country that they could only hope to see in person. Furthermore, as Nancy K. Anderson suggests, art mirrored the larger struggle between technology and nature and also helped people to bridge the gap between the two. As she notes in her essay "The Kiss of Enterprise," there was a good side, not just suffering, associated with the transcontinental railroad. For one thing, it made the beauty of the Western landscape accessible to many.

Art history has traditionally represented the viewpoint of rulers and patrons, for it is they who commissioned the art works or purchased them in the first place. These essays rightfully urge us to question that perspective in examining art and to consider the narrative that underlies scenes of history and also scenes of landscape. But if the subject matter has a "dark side," so too does the scholarship. This sort of thinking tends to divide people into mutually suspicious groups, pitting the less advantaged against the more advantaged and creating a situation in which scholarship that claims "objectivity" is little more than one-sided propaganda.

Indirectly, at least, Truettner asks us to consider how we are to assess events of gain and loss, and what we need to know to do so. Further, in taking the intolerant stance that it does, *The West as America* asks us to think closely about the border between documentation and propaganda and where one becomes the other. Can we tell? Moreover, how does knowing affect what we see?

The book boasts an extensive bibliography, notes placed conveniently at the end of each essay, and a good index. When this material was exhibited in Washington, the interpretative text panels caused public furor and consternation, but the art objects themselves drew only praise. Reproduced in this volume in color plates and black and white prints, the art offers us direct access to our visual heritage, access that is always welcome.

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